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VOLUME 35, NUMBER 3, A THRILLING PUBLICATION AUGUST, 1949

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Rustlers of Black Range

By Jackson Cole

The Texas settlement of Castroville faces fearful destruction at the hands of scheming hombres until fighting Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield comes riding to combat evil rustlers and bring law to the lawless! 9

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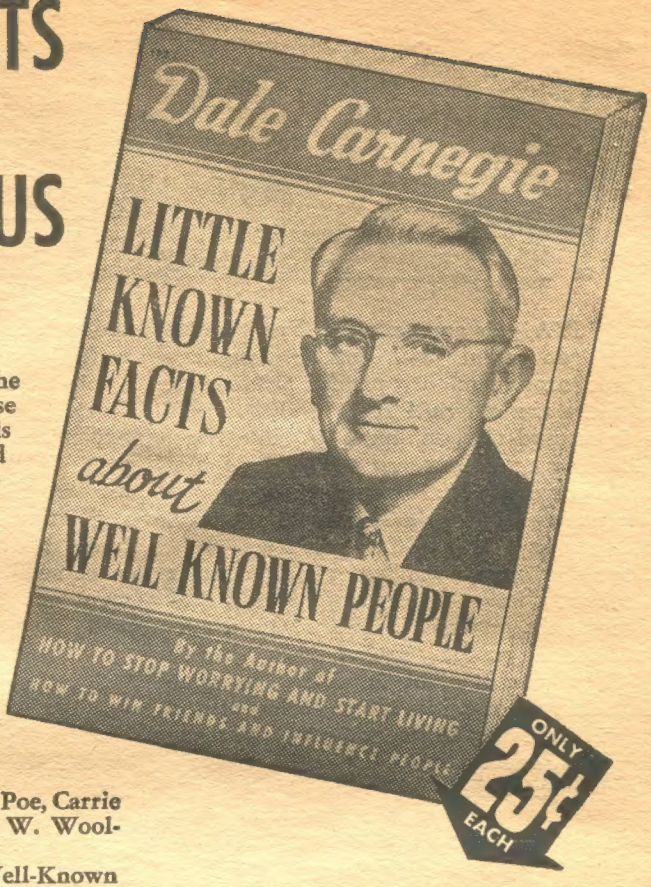
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HIYA, gals and galluses! Yeah, I sure do maul the English language around mighty painful, sometimes. But there are others, I reekon. What riles me is messed-up gun lingo. Awhile back, an Arizona posse captured a desperado, and a news correspondent on the scene reported about a storekeeper who had sold the culprit "three boxes of .38 caliber shells."

Now, ever since I was big enough to reach the stirrups, bullet-shooting guns used cartridges, loads or rounds. Only shotgun ammunition was properly spoken of as "shells."

Well, maybe it's not important to some folks. But for me, just a smattering of gun savvy is a big help in remembering the three outstanding characters of pioneer history, in their right order.

Great Frontiersmen

Here's what I mean. Daniel Boone, 1735-1820, came along when the old flintlock was in use. Davy Crockett, 1786-1836, belonged to the period of the percussion-cap rifle. Kit Carson, 1809-1868, saw the repeating rifle invented and brought into use. Each of these great frontiersmen are linked with three distinct periods of gun history. Easy, isn't it? You can't miss.

History dates are mighty dull study, I agree. But the dates when these three famous Americans lived and fought and died make an interesting comparison. The year that Daniel Boone died, Davy Crockett was already and up-and-coming celebrity — elected just about then to the Alabama Legislature, his first step in politics.

When Davy died in a blaze of glory at the fall of the Alamo, in 1836, Kit Carson, pathfinder, trapper and Indian fighter, had pretty well explored the wild West, and was on the road to fame.

So, the overlapping of the lives of these three colorful characters shows how fast that the wilderness, from the Alleghanies westward, was settled.

Kit Carson was the natural successor of Davy Crockett, as a promoter of national expansion. But he was an entirely different sort. Davy doted on crowds, and was a born mixer. Kit, bold in deeds, was word-shy and shunned public admiration. He might have rose higher and faster, if he'd had more self-conceit. As it was, General Fremont and others of his associates captured some of the glory that was due him.

Kit Carson

At our last get-together, we brushed up on the life of Davy Crockett. Let's now get better acquainted with Kit Carson.

Like a good many other early Americans, Kit didn't know exactly where he was born. Boundaries were vague in those days, and territorial domains were huge. Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, what did it matter? The consensus of most biographers say Madison County, Kentucky, was his native place, but that before he was one year old his folks moved to Missouri, then known as upper Louisiana.

That was the year 1810. The territory was primitive, just then opening for settlement. Indian wars raged. When Kit was 15, his father apprenticed him to a saddler named Workman. But the work was too monotonous for the boy, who had trapped and hunted since he was big enough to tote a gun. So in 1826 he vamoosed and joined a band of traders headed for Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Iron Nerve

During the long journey, Kit proved his iron nerve. As the expedition moved along Arkansas River, a teamster accidentally shot himself, receiving a bullet in his left

arm that shattered the bone. Three days later, infection set in. That arm had to be amputated to save the man's life. All older members of the party declined the terrible responsibility. Fifteen-year-old Kit volunteered.

While four men held the sufferer, the boy went to work with a razor, handsaw and kingbolt. After severing the useless arm, he cauterized the stump with the red-hot kingbolt. The wounded man recovered and afterwards was Kit's companion in several expeditions.

The travelers reached Santa Fe, but soon after Kit went up to Taos, about one hundred miles north, to break wild horses. The Mexican village of Taos was his home thereafter, until his death, though he was actually on the roam most of his life.

He learned Spanish and worked as a teamster, making trips into Mexico and as far west as the copper mines on upper Gila River, hauling ore from the region of what is now Globe, Arizona. Taos, in those days, was the winter hangout of "mountain men," a hardy lot of trappers. Their tales fascinated Kit, so he joined a band of 40, well-armed to repel Indian attacks, and went beaver trapping on the Gila.

His First Indian Fight

Kit got into his first Indian fight when Apaches attacked. The trappers came out on top, routing the hostiles, killing eleven of them. The party split, after a fair take of furs, about half of them returning to Santa Fe and the rest, 18 in all, setting off for faraway California.

A mere matter of distance didn't balk those "mountain men." But they probably would never had tackled that trip if they'd known beforehand, the hardships that were in store for them in crossing the dry, rugged desert country. On the way they had to kill and eat several of their horses, drinking the blood.

Records are confusing and incomplete concerning their California adventures. But the trappers did reach Mission San Gabriel, a few miles east of the wretched little pueblo of Los Angeles. Kit got along well with the Spanish-Californians, for by now he spoke their language as fluently as his own. They trapped profitably as far north as Sacramento River, north of San Francisco Bay.

(Continued on page 92)

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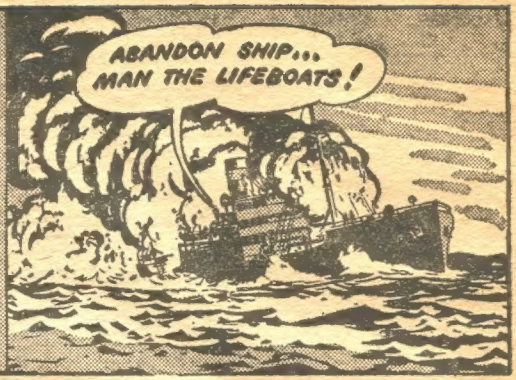

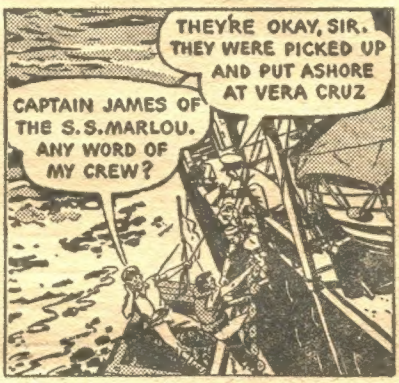

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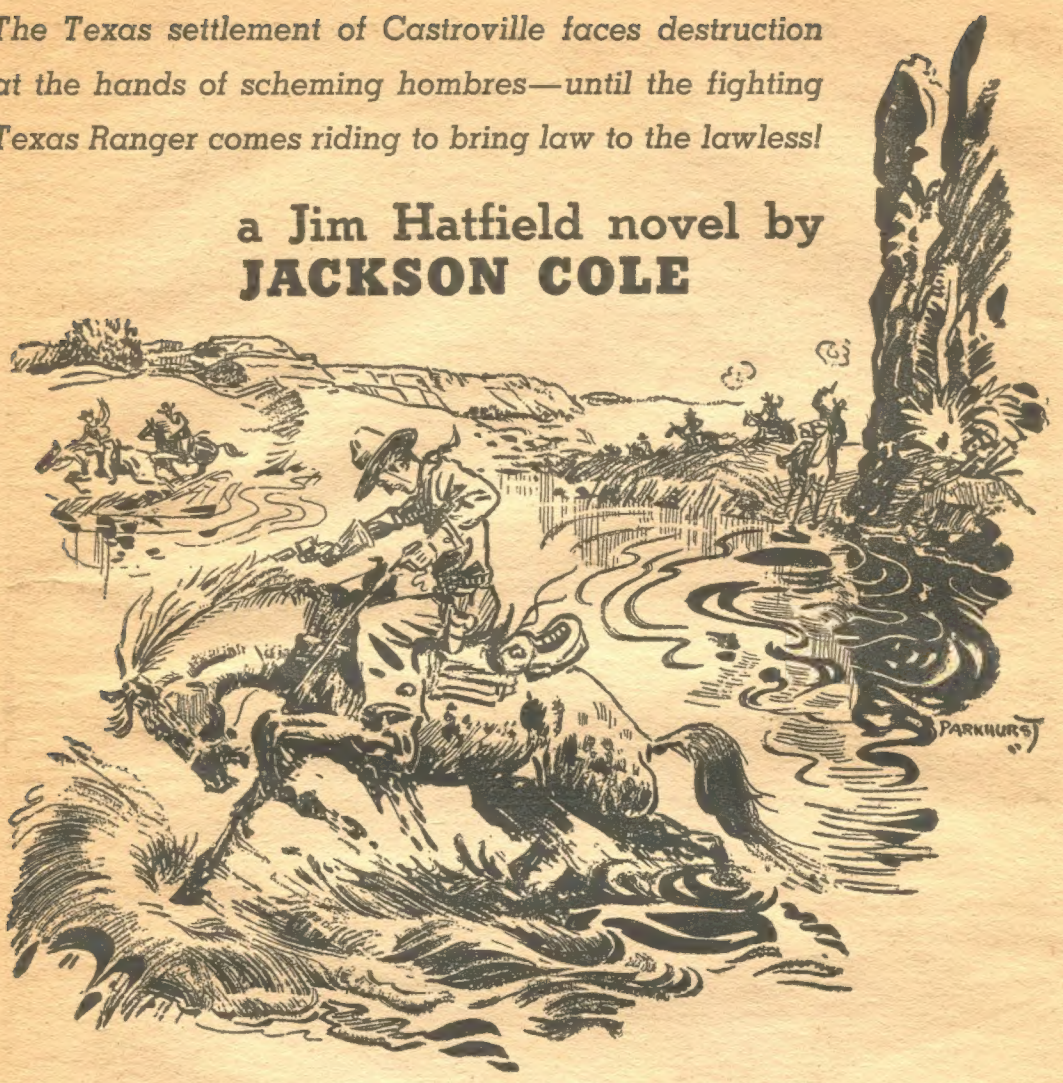

RUSTLERS of BLACK RANGE

CHAPTER I

Guns at the Biergarten

IN a rounding moon's silver light Castroville stood silent, its thick-walled, high-roofed homes with tall dormers and long, arcaded galleries crowded in the center. The Texas settlement had been built by hard-working Alsatian, Swiss and German immigrants fleeing persecution in Europe to the free new world, led by Count Henry Castro. Now, a generation later, their children clung to the spot.

An oil lamp burned in the rear of Otto Schorp's *Biergarten*. The front door had been bolted after the last customer an hour

A Sleepy, Peace-Loving Little Town Suddenly

before. The building was an example of German *Fachwerk*, its ribs filled with a combination of wood and stone. The spacious rear yard was walled with brick, sharp spikes stuck in the top. In the garden were shrubs and flowers, tables where patrons might eat, drink and relax.

Across a thick-slabbed bench table two men were engaged in verbal combat. A third, Otto Schorp, owner of the place, hovered by, his nervousness betrayed by the way he kept wringing his fat hands. Schorp was porcine and paunchy, too large for his skin which stretched taut over bulging flesh. He wore a leather apron to protect his brown trousers and white shirt. Steel-colored hair cut in Prussian style stuck from his hard skull. His brown mustache was full and stained from the tobacco he habitually smoked in a curving clay pipe.

"Baron! Baron Wier! Please do not yourself so excite!" he begged, his watery blue eyes anxious. Schorp fawned around the Baron, solicitous as a jackal cringing in the presence of a lion.

Baron Dolf Wier was tall and elegant in dark suit, ruffled shirt and stock. A sword cane lay by his hand. Sideburns sprouted from his massive cheeks. His dark eyes sparked with rage and blood burned his cheeks. He sniffed furiously, his manner imperious.

"*Schwein*!" shouted Wier. "This grant was given my noble ancestors by His Catholic Majesty, the King of Spain, for services rendered in the wars, do you understand?" He banged the table with his fist.

Two great, shaggy wolfhounds stretched on the floor came alert and growled but subsided at Wier's sharp command.

JEAN ULRICH, the object of Wier's wrath, was of Alsatian strain. He had been born in Texas. While he dwelt in Castroville, his small ranch was outside the town and he went forth to work it according to the custom of his people. He was about thirty, stolid of mien, sturdy and honest of purpose.

"Spanish grant, Spanish grant!" said Ulrich derisively. "How many times have we heard that yarn, Baron Wier? It won't hold water in our courts. Wait till I tell Gaston Fest about this."

Wier's outburst had only made Ulrich more stubborn. The Baron studied his opponent, who was blocking him at the very outset. He slid a long-fingered hand inside his jacket and Ulrich tensed, thinking Wier might be reaching for a pistol. But the Baron brought forth a silver snuffbox, snapped open the spring cover, took a pinch and sneezed twice. He wiped his face with a silk kerchief and sniffed.

"I've made you a fair offer, Ulrich," he said more quietly. 'To save you the expenses of legal proceedings I was willing to give you something. Think again."

"I have thought enough," replied Ulrich with simple dignity. "Now I am going home to bed. I have to work tomorrow."

"Wait," said Wier sharply. "What do you intend to tell Fest?"

Ulrich hesitated, then answered. "I'll tell him and my other friends someone is trying to bluff us. I'll tell them something else, too. My father brought from Europe a book of peerage. When I was a boy, it was one of the few I had to read and I could recite it by heart and still treasure it."

Wier's eyes slitted. "Ignorant clodhopper!" he fumed. "I'm surprised to hear you can read."

Ulrich pushed back his chair. "Good night, *Baron*."

Wier leaped up, seized the sword cane and slashed it across Ulrich's face. Ulrich recoiled from the blow. Schorp clucked in horror and the huge dogs snarled, crouching to spring. Ulrich was armed but Wier had the jump on him. The Baron whipped a blunt-nosed derringer from his pocket and fired point-blank. Ulrich was hit. His mouth flew open. For a moment he seemed to have turned to stone. Then he crumpled to the uneven flooring.

The excited dogs bounded over to nuzzle Ulrich while Otto Schorp knelt beside the quivering figure. "You have killed him, Baron!" he gasped, his voice shrill with alarm.

"A good thing," snarled Wier. His nostrils were wide as he sniffed, the smoking gun raised.

"On account of it his friends for us will come," wailed Schorp.

Wier fended off the wolfhounds with his booted foot. 'Who will know if we don't tell? Your wife and servants are asleep upstairs. The shot made little noise, certainly not enough to alarm the town. Get a shovel and bury him in the back of the garden, Otto. You're my loyal retainer. You understand how I must trust you?"

Fearful admiration for Wier's strong, ruthless nature, blind adulation of a title, possessed Otto Schorp. He had boasted about the noble guest ever since Wier's arrival, talking of little else. Schorp feared the consequences of the shooting but had come under Wier's domination and at this point he made his choice. Obediently he lifted the dying Ulrich and with his burden staggered to the garden door.

* * * * *

Andrew Jackson Pickett slouched on the Hondo House bar, listening to the talk made by the grinning fellow he had met in the saloon that evening.

"Aje" Pickett was a range rider, an expert cowboy. He was welcome on any ranch during the busy season and it was his habit, as with many of his kind, to work at an outfit for a year or two and then drift along, urged by youth's restless spirit. His last stop had been near San Antonio but he did not like crowding and after the roundup had quit and ridden west on the highway, intending to head across the Pecos into the Big Bend. He had stopped to rest and eat in Hondo.

JIM HATFIELD

PICKETT was huge, with tow hair and wide-set brown eyes lighting a pleasant, open face. Those mighty hands could hold and twist the burly neck of a wild bull, although Pickett was so good-natured he seldom lost his temper with anything or anybody. His father had fought at New Orleans under Andrew Jackson. After the death of his first wife, Pickett senior, late in life, had married a second time.

The deep admiration he had felt for his

former commander and later the President of the United States had caused him to name his son for Old Hickory. Aje's father had taught him the three fundamentals of a frontier education: how to write, to play cards and to shoot straight. When the youth was nearly fourteen a smallpox epidemic had carried off his parents and Aje had ridden off on his own. He had been picked up by a trail outfit and had learned the game.

Homeless, easy-going and rollicking along, Pickett was ready for anything decent in the way of excitement. He wore leather chaps over dark pants thrust into halfboots with the crimson star of Texas decorating the tops, the usual cartridge belt supporting the holstered six-shooter and indispensable hunting knife, a blue shirt with V neck draped by a reversed bandanna. The chinstrap of his high-crowned Stetson was loose in its butternut runner.

"Bandolier" Ed Tully, as the saloon ac-

So swift was the approach of Hatfield and his men that the outlaws were caught off balance and began retreating to the rock shelves (CHAP. IX)

quaintance had named himself when he and Aje had started chatting and trading drinks, was not so large as Pickett though he was bigger than the ordinary mortal. Bandoliers crossed his bony torso and he made a rangy, impressive figure. Reddish hair showed under his "Nebraska" hat,

"Well, if yuh really like excitement yuh don't have to feel bad on that account. Plenty of it for an hombre right now. I can show yuh how to enjoy life. Yuh say yuh ain't workin'. How are yuh with cows?"

pushed back on his long head. He had a hawk beak, a florid complexion speckled with large brown freckles, and up his right cheek was a scar where some sharp blade had once slashed. It was healed unevenly, pulling Tully's upper lip out of line so he always seemed to grin on that side. After several drinks Tully had brought up the subject himself, pointing to the scar.

"A cussed Yankee got me there durin' the War," he explained. "But I was the last one he ever went for. I got sick of bein' ordered around, so soon after I lit out across the Sabine."

"I was too young for any real fightin'," answered Pickett.

"Like brother and sisters," said the smiling Pickett.

"That's what I figgered from yore look. Care to join my trail outfit? I'll make yuh *segundo* just on yore size. If yuh can't lick any man in the outfit, I'll eat my hat, strap and all."

"I might do it. Where yuh drivin' from, San Antonio?"

"Castroville. We hit the trail across country. Two dollars a day, grub and horses furnished, no questions asked."

The pay was high and Pickett was tempted. "I just come through Castroville this mornin'. Aimed to keep goin' but I might as well go north as south."

"*Bueno,* it's a deal." Bandolier Tully shook hands, contract enough for Pickett.

Bandolier Ed had friends around who were playing at cards or dice in the crowded bar or drinking. Some had gone out to stroll about the settlement. They wore the spurred boots, leather and Stetsons of range riders. They looked tough and a shave and cleanup would not have hurt many, but a crew away from home usually had this aspect.

Tully later introduced Pickett to several of his followers. "Aje Pickett, boys. He savvies the trail and I'm makin' him *segundo* on the drive. That's Murph, with the wall eye. Shorty, Mex and Arizona Dave." They eyed the newcomer and short nods were exchanged. Pickett's size made men respectful and his unfailing good humor won them over.

Early next morning Tully, Pickett and a dozen more hit the dirt road from Hondo to Castroville. The day promised to be warm and balmy as the sun came up before them, redder than Bandolier's hair. Pickett rode up front beside Tully and they were in high spirits. South of them lay the great Texas brush country, a gently rolling plain where thorned brush and trees grew so densely that in many places penetration was impossible unless a path was laboriously hacked out. They were on the lower rim of the Edwards Plateau and as the sun climbed into the azure sky, a hot golden orb, birds and butterflies hovered over the chaparral. A road runner darted from the thickets and raced ahead. Tully pulled a Colt and peppered away at it, the slugs kicking spurts of dust close to the flying bird which veered back to the jungle. Later, Bandolier Ed hit a jackrabbit zigzagging in their path. The others also kept practicing their marksmanship, firing at still or moving objects. Pickett was a good shot but preferred tin cans or other inanimate things as targets.

CHAPTER II

Rustlers' Raid

BY noon the trail crew reached the heights overlooking the Medina River Valley, with Castroville below. The town was a bit of old Alsace-Lorraine, uprooted and transplanted beside the stream, basking contentedly in the sunshine. The church, the high-roofed, thick-walled homes with tall dormers, crowded the streets.

Outside the settlement were small ranches, where cattle grazed.

"Funny lookin' shebang, ain't it?" observed Tully. "Them folks stick to their outlandish ways, don't they?" There was a note of contempt in his rather hoarse voice. He pulled up, rolled a corn husk cigarette and lighted it, puffing blue smoke from the open corner of his mouth. He seemed self-conscious about his scarred face and kept referring to it. "Comes in handy when yuh smoke," he went on with a grin. "I can blow rings without tryin'. Well, we'll go into camp and take it easy, boys. There's a spring a couple hundred yards from here, on the hillside. Yuh savvy where it is, Murph. See yuh later."

Pickett went with the crew but Bandolier Ed rode on alone, down the winding slope to Castroville. Behind Murph they pushed into the brush to a silver pool under a jutting boulder where they unsaddled, rubbed down their mustangs and picketed them. All carried packs, slicker and blanket roll, carbine and one or more revolvers, with plenty of ammunition. Pickett was similiarly equipped, everything he owned in the world stowed in his bags or hooked to his saddle.

Aje Pickett was willing to lie around in the shade through the heat of the day. He grew restless as four o'clock came and went and Tully did not reappear. Murph and the rest of them were friendly enough but Pickett was a newcomer, and they seemed to have a lot to say to each other in tones too low for Pickett to overhear.

"Reckon I'll ride down to the town for a drink," said Pickett.

"No." Murph's narrow, dark face, covered by black beard stubble, was set. "Tully said wait here."

It was a free country but Pickett could see that if he insisted and left them, it would cause a rift. On the trail he was to be second-in-command. Here, Murph was it. He took a walk around, smoking and sharing a bottle with them.

They had hardtack and jerked beef and ate a cold supper. Just before dark fell

Bandolier Tully rode into camp. He seemed preoccupied.

"Murph," he ordered. "Take Chick and hustle back to Hondo. Meet yuh here tomorrer night." The leader drew Murph aside and gave him more instructions which Pickett could not catch. "Rest of yuh saddle up," said Tully, when he had finished with Murph.

Tully led them into Castroville and to a large *Biergarten* with an old-fashioned wooden sign over the front, "Beer and Spirits, Otto Schorp, Prop." It had a high wall at the rear. They dropped rein, ducked under the railing and went into the bar. Men were in there, at the counter or sitting at tables. Through open doors Pickett could see some of the open garden, where people sat drinking and eating by the light of hanging lanterns.

"That's Otto Schorp, ain't it?" asked Pickett, pointing at the paunchy man who seemed about to pop from his tight hide. Schorp wore a leather apron and his steely hair was like wire, sticking from his Prussian skull. A curving clay pipe was in his mouth and he helped support it by a fat hand as he leaned over the liquor counter. His pink cheeks moved as he sucked on the stem.

"Yeah, that's Schorp," nodded Tully. "They call him 'Bristles.' All right, boys. Go on and drink up."

They had not been there long when a tall, elegant gentleman in a dark suit came down the steep stairs. He carried a thin cane and his chin was stuck out, accentuating his massive jaws, giving him an imperious look. He seemed not to notice the common herd. Schorp braced up and hurried around the end of the bar, rubbing his hands together. Pickett was close enough to hear the German proprietor say in an obsequious tone, "Baron Wier! Was the bird done to your excellency's liking?"

"Satisfactory," snapped Wier.

BANDOLIER Ed strolled over, and for a time chatted with Wier and Schorp, their voices down. Wier's haughty eyes touched Pickett and moved on to study others of Tully's men. After a time Wier nodded and went back upstairs, Bandolier Ed at his heels.

It was near midnight when Tully led his riders to the spring rendezvous and they turned in there. Aje Pickett could get along with anybody but the longer he remained with this crew, the uneasier he grew. He slept soundly but after coffee next day he approached Bandolier Ed.

"When do we start? What's all the maneuverin' about?"

"Won't be long," evaded Tully. "Once on the trail yuh needn't worry. Soon as Murph gets back with the others we'll go."

"The others! Why, yuh got a big enough crew now to drive any herd I ever see!"

Tully frowned and shrugged, turned away. Pickett hung around, curious and suspicious but not asking further questions. He had no intention of going owl-hoot. He decided to make sure what was going on.

When Murph pulled in late that afternoon he had a score more riders, half of them Mexicans, with him. Their chief seemed to be the white-toothed, smiling *vaquero* in steeple sombrero and purple velvet, who drew aside for a talk with Tully. Pickett learned his name was Gasca. The two groups fraternized, seeming to know each other. Games, bottles, foul boastings, occupied them.

Pickett kept to himself. Fires were started after dark and over them strips of beef were forked and broiled. Liquor and biscuits were on hand.

Aje knew now he had fallen in with evil companions but he was too shrewd to make the break openly. He turned in late. Gasca, Tully and Murph were in their cups, and he lay not too far off in the shadows. As they grew drunker their voices rose.

"Yes, suh," said Tully. "We'll have that big herd at Gaston Fest's ranch this time tomorrer night. And the chief says he's got plenty more work for us. He's a real high-grade hombre."

"Big ideas, huh?" growled Murph.

"Shore. And we're the boys who will help carry 'em out."

"*Si, si,*" said the grinning Gasca, raising his flask.

Pickett feigned sleep. When they finally turned in, he gave them time to drift off before edging off into the shadows. The moon was up and some of the fires still burned. The mustangs, among them Aje's, were picketed in an open space. Pickett found his saddle and brought out his black

horse, secured his hull. He was about to sling a leg over the seat when Bandolier Ed Tully's voice stopped him:

"Where yuh bound, Pickett?"

Aje slowly swung to face the chief. He could see the red glow of Tully's eyes in the light, the sheen of his flesh and the rangy figure.

"I'm on my way, Tully," drawled Pickett. "I don't like the smell here."

"Figgered so when I seen yuh slip off." A Colt jumped to Tully's hand and the black muzzle pinned Pickett. "Guess I made a mistake pickin' yuh up. I thought yuh'd act right when it come down to it. Yuh'll have to make the best of things, son. It's easy enough when yuh get the hang of it. Unsaddle and get back to camp. I won't hurt yuh but yuh'll obey orders from now on and if yuh try to run away again yuh'll die."

Pickett shrugged."All right."

Pickett feigned a fumble with the cinch buckles and Tully took a step closer. It was one step too near. Pickett had just been watching for his chance. His left hand flicked out and closed on the cylinder of Tully's revolver so it could not turn. With a sudden wrench he ripped it from Bandolier's hurt fingers. Tully swore and shouted for help as Pickett drew him in.

Bandolier punched, kicked and bit, swearing a blue streak. Strong as Tully was, he could not resist the mighty Aje who snatched the other Colt and slung it after the first. Gasca, Murph and the others were jumping from their blankets to answer Tully's alarm. Pickett raised his opponent overhead and threw him hard into a thorned bush several feet away. Aje whirled, hit leather and rode into the nearby woods.

Slugs followed but it was dark in the trees. He heard bullets clipping leaves or singing close, but soon he was beyond pursuit. . . .

IN the morning sunshine Aje Pickett waved and approached the thin, dark man supervising the work around a cattle herd. Dust rose in the air and calls of working cowboys. They were a few miles outside Castroville, to the north of the town. According to the directions Pickett had obtained from a storekeeper earlier, this was Gaston Fest's ranch. Fest lived in the settlement, going out to work each day as was the custom of his people.

"Yes, I'm Gaston Fest," nodded the slightly built rider as Pickett pulled up and turned his horse so they could talk.

Fest had keen black eyes, a lean face. His crisp black hair was touched by gray at the temples. He wore a Texan's rig and Stetson and handled a mustang with practised ease. His voice was fine, with a very faint accent, hardly more than a hint that he had been born in Alsace and had been brought to America as a lad. The cast of his features was Gallic. He watched Pickett curiously, impressed by the cowboy's great size and obvious strength.

"Are these all yore steers?" asked Aje.

Fest shook his head. "A combined herd," he explained. "A dozen of us own it. We're makin' ready to drive to Kansas railhead on a mutual basis." Fest had a deep, natural courtesy.

"I savvy." It was not unusual for several small ranchers to get together for such an undertaking. "I brought yuh a warnin', Mr. Fest. A bunch of back-trail riders intend to rustle these cows tonight." Pickett gave a swift resumé of what he had learned about Tully, Gasca and the rest.

Fest was deeply grateful. He thanked Pickett. "Will yuh stay with us?" he asked. "We'd be flattered."

Pickett shook his head. It had been his intention, after delivering the warning, to ride on fast. He knew that Bandolier Ed would never rest until he had avenged himself.

A slim rider whirled up, bringing the chestnut mustang to a pinpoint stop. For a moment Pickett thought it a boy but as he took another look he realized it was a young woman and a very pretty one. Her curly black hair was tucked under her Stetson and her black eyes danced with lively youth and interest as she returned Pickett's admiring gaze. Her features were lovely, her lips full and red.

"My daughter Colette, suh," said Fest.

She smiled and Pickett melted. "I aimed to say, Mr. Fest, I'll be mighty glad to remain hereabouts and give a hand," murmured Aje.

"*Bueno.* I must collect more of my friends. Many are out in the hills and on the range chousin' out more cattle to add to the herd." Fest's brow was lined as he figured out his defense.

At sight of the returning fighters, the outlaws began beating a retreat from Castroville (CHAP. X)

A shout rang out. Pickett swung, taking his eyes off Colette for a moment. Down the long slope from the wooded ridge to the southwest came a line of galloping masked horsemen. Aje needed only one look. He recognized these outlaws.

"Here they come!" howled Aje, pulling a Colt and cocking it. "They've jumped the clock!"

Fest reacted swiftly. "Colette! Get over to the hay barn, at once!" Across the pasture stood a structure used to store feed and equipment. Bullets were already singing in the warm air and at Fest's calls, his friends hurriedly turned to face the attack.

But there were hardly a dozen on hand and Tully had three times as many. The fierce rustlers were shooting carbines and pistols as they drove in. The howling and explosions alarmed the cattle and the beasts began moving while Fest, Pickett and the other defenders dared not stop to check the growing stampede.

It was a bold coup, the daylight attack. Even as Pickett swung into the scrap, he realized that Tully must have guessed the warning would be carried to Fest and so had come right over to strike.

Colette rode slowly to the barn, dismounted and turned her horse loose. Fest hurriedly formed his defense but they were beaten back by the crashing, hard-riding band.

"To the barn, all of yuh!" shouted Fest.

They could get inside and save their lives, if not hold onto the steers. Bunches of cattle had broken off and were trotting, then picking it up and tearing off in the din.

Pickett fought back at them, Fest by his side. A bullet from a light carbine cut Aje's boot and his leg suddenly went numb. His mustang faltered and fell. Pickett managed to kick his feet from the stirrups and landed hard but rolling.

CHAPTER III

Mission

CAPTAIN William McDowell, chief of Texas Rangers at Austin, tried holding one hand with the other so that neither might get into mischief. He was angry, the complaints on his desk telling of dark doings in the Lone Star state, where McDowell was responsible for maintenance of law and order.

He found he was breaking his own wrist with his grip so he let go, giving an explosive exclamation and a sudden bop which hurt his lame back. For with the many years there had descended upon the old officer the usual physical failings of the body. Though his spirit was still strong, he could no longer jump on his horse and ride off on a hard campaign as of yore.

Yet few knew Texas and the ways of the evildoer as did McDowell. As long as he could limp to his desk at headquarters he would be valuable to his state.

He picked up the call bell but instead of ringing it flung it through the open doorway. It clanged alarmingly loud as it hit the wall and again as it dropped to the floor. This was faintly satisfying. An attendant from the outer room, who knew McDowell and his temper, peeked around the door, making sure the captain had nothing in either hand.

"You want Ranger Hatfield, suh?" the orderly asked.

"What do you think?"

He fumed as he waited for his star officer. Hatfield was the answer to the hard ones and this had just that aspect. McDowell was expert at sensing potential danger.

A soft step told him Jim Hatfield was at hand. He always felt soothed at sight of that tall, mighty figure, in the range clothing, leather riding pants and blue shirt, big Stetson, the heavy Colts in their oiled, supple holsters.

"Yes, suh, Cap'n McDowell!" Hatfield's voice was soft.

He stood well over six feet, with wide shoulders and torso tapering to a slim waist, a fighter's build. He had a clean look, a rugged face softened by a wide, good-humored mouth. The gray-green eyes were alert and clear, his slim hands easy at his sides. Black hair showed, sheening with vitality. McDowell knew how fast this tall fellow could move, with what unerring power he could fight.

And Hatfield's mind was just as brilliant in its deductive strength, in estimating a situation and bringing pressure

against an enemy.

They sat down at the desk and McDowell explained the trouble.

"Head of it seems to be around Castroville, Hatfield," McDowell said. "A combined herd belongin' to Gaston Fest and other ranchers was run off in broad daylight by a band of thieves. A cowboy was killed in the rush and a couple more wounded. Fest wrote me a complaint. He says an hombre named Ulrich has been missin' but he can't savvy what happened to him. Yuh know Castroville and other spots down there were settled by folks from Alsace and Switzerland, from Germany and other countries. They come here under Count Henry Castro in 'Forty-Eight to escape persecution and I don't aim to have any of that in Texas. They're hard-workin', decent people and never have caused any trouble. The older ones hang to their old customs and the settlements look like they'd been fetched over from Europe but they built 'em from Texas stone and timber."

Hatfield was taking it in. "I rode through Castroville on the highway, Cap'n. It's a sleepy little place."

"Not now it ain't. Someone's done woke it up with a bang. They like peace down there but they have war, from all reports."

A sharp rap interrupted the conference. The oldish Ranger who acted as general factotum in the outer office had come in and McDowell scowled at the break.

"Excuse me, Cap'n Bill but there's a gent here won't take no for an answer." He glanced at the pad on which he had written the caller's name. "His handle is Baron Dolf Wier, that's it."

McDowell leaped up. "Wier! Gaston Fest mentions him in his letter. Hatfield, step behind that screen and listen."

The Ranger went to the far end of the room and placed a stool behind a three-panel screen shielding McDowell's arsenal, where guns hung from wooden pegs. Soon a harsh voice greeted the captain and McDowell replied.

"Howdy, Mr. Wier. Take the load off yore feet. What fetches yuh here?"

THROUGH the crack where one panel hinged to the next, Hatfield could glimpse the visitor, a tall, imperious man carrying a thin cane. He was elegant in a dark suit, ruffled shirt and white stock. Wier had massive jaws and dark, strong eyes. He extracted a silver snuffbox from his jacket pocket and took a pinch, sneezing and sniffing. He wiped his face with a silk kerchief embroidered with a red crest.

Then he came to the point. "I wish to lodge a complaint against some stupids in Castroville who are hampering my legal enterprises. Let me introduce myself. I'm Baron Dolf Wier, president of the Wier Construction Company. Our main office is here in Austin."

McDowell nodded, as he studied the caller. "Didn't I read in the *Statesman* not long back yore firm had won some big road buildin' contracts?"

"Correct. We're civil engineers. I own grants to lands around Castroville but am being kept off by this Gaston Fest and other local dunderheads. They're no better than squatters." He sniffed in contempt. "They've dared oppose me and have fired on my agents. The courts will uphold me and I've come to Austin to start proceedings against Fest and his bandits. It may interest you to know I have great influence in the capital." Wier paused to allow this delicate threat to sink in.

"The Texas Rangers never worry about influence, Mr. Wier," drawled McDowell in a silky voice which would have warned anyone who knew the old officer. "We do our duty."

"So, so," replied Wier, with an airy wave. "All I ask is justice. I've come to put you straight in this matter, in case the lies of my enemies should reach you. For the good of the state, modern business must not be held up by these backward elements in the wilds. I would like to count on you as my ally." The Baron extracted a fat wallet from his inside pocket and took several bills from it, placing the money on the blotter within McDowell's reach. "I'll be happy to assist any officer you send down there."

Silent behind the screen, Hatfield waited for the blast. He knew how McDowell felt about bribery in any form. The captain was still holding down the escape valve of his temper.

"Any Ranger I order out will be more than able to help himself, suh," came his low voice. "By the way, yuh dropped

some of yore money."

"That's for you," said Wier, brows rising. "Buy yourself a new saddle or whatever you fancy."

McDowell's gnarled fist nudged the bills which fluttered to the carpet. "Yuh dropped 'em. Pick it up, Mr. Baron!"

A brick-red flush came slowly up Wier's massive jaws. He sniffed and glared. McDowell glared back, the two sparring for psychological supremacy. "You'll regret this," warned Wier. "I tell you I have influence. You'll be broken."

McDowell blew up with a bang. He leaped to his feet and hit the desk so hard the inkwell flew up and overturned.

"Pick it up and sashay before I give yuh what yuh deserve, Wier!"

Sputtering in fury, Wier rose, sticking out his chin and confronting McDowell. After a moment of this, however, he stooped, gathered up the bills and stuffed them in a pocket. "Very well. You've made your choice, Captain!" The Baron shook his cane but as McDowell took a step toward him, Wier turned and made a quick but dignified exit.

The baron gone, Hatfield emerged. The corner of his wide mouth was turned up. McDowell was scowling and fuming.

"You heard him, Hatfield! Keep after him till yuh get him!"

Fully briefed and intrigued by Wier's visit, Hatfield shook hands and strolled to the yard. Here waited his magnificent golden gelding, Hatfield's war horse. Goldy was capable of carrying his tall friend, of sustaining the terrific pace a Ranger must endure. A carbine rode in a boot under one long leg. The pack at the cantle, protected by a slicker, held a blanket and what few belongings could not be stuffed in the saddlebags.

He waved to McDowell, slouched in the open side entry, watching as the Ranger moved out. McDowell wished he could go along.

HATFIELD rode through the bustling town, the dome of the Capitol dominating the hill. He crossed Congress Avenue and made for the East Side, where he dropped rein before a small, neat cottage on the outskirts. Austin descended from here in tiers down to the bend of the blue Colorado, where Mount Bonnell could be seen, kissed by the distant sunlight.

A pretty young woman with an exquisite figure, golden glints in her thick hair, answered his knock. Her amber eyes looked up into the gray-green ones and she smiled her welcome. "Jim! Come in. Buck's around somewhere."

Anita Robertson was a schoolteacher and the Ranger had fought for her and her younger brother when foes had attacked them on the Brazos. They had become fast friends and Buck was learning the business of state law enforcement, the tall officer acting as the lad's mentor. When possible Hatfield took Buck Robertson with him on his missions.

Anita led him to the parlor and then went to make coffee and serve a snack to her guest. In reply to her calls, a war-whoop split the air and a tall, lean youth of sixteen with freckled cheeks and an upturned nose came rushing in with youthful exuberance. Brown eyes danced under the shock of tow hair. He wore levis and a flannel shirt, a kerchief at his scrawny throat.

"When do we leave?" shouted Buck. "Hurrah, no school for a week!"

"Take it easy, there ain't that much hurry." Hatfield grinned at him and shook hands.

Buck Robertson was learning the ropes and some day hoped to join the Rangers. Anita was willing to let her brother travel with Hatfield for she realized the value of the guidance and education furnished by the splendid officer who was their friend. It mean worry for the young woman while they were away but she knew it was worth it.

They drank coffee and ate the cakes Anita had made that morning. Hatfield told them about the case, of Castroville and the people inhabiting it, and described Baron Wier's visit to McDowell. He shook his head, smiling.

"He shore made an error when he tried to bribe Cap'n McDowell."

Yet he had sized up Dolf Wier and he knew a strong man when he saw one. There was no joke about the Baron's power.

"I aim to get more of a line on Wier before we leave Austin," he continued. "S'pose yuh saddle Old Heart Seven and get set. We'll ride downtown and see what we can see."

Anita waved to them as they left to-

gether, Buck eager for the danger trails. It was easy enough to find the offices of the Wier Construction Company, on Congress Avenue south of the Capitol.

The sign over the door read:

BARON DOLF WIER, PRES.
Construction Engineers

The door stood wide and a clerk sat at a table but Wier was not there.

They waited. Workers were quitting for the day. Austin bustled with the traffic of passing people, carriages and drays. Southeast along the river teemed the congested Mexican Quarter. A startling purple halo crowned Austin as the sun dropped behind the Colorado range.

Wier arrived just before dark, in a victoria. A heavy, stout man wearing a high silk hat and angling a cheroot between clenched teeth, was with the baron. Two huge, shaggy wolfhounds crouched on the box by the coachman.

"That's our man, Buck," murmured the Ranger. "Watch it! Looks like he has a bodyguard followin'." Several armed riders drew up and eyed the tall man. "Let's sashay," suggested Hatfield.

They strolled up the sidewalk as Wier and his friend alighted. The baron picked up the chain leashes and went inside with the stout man, the wolfhounds trailing their master. The horsemen dismounted, rolling smokes and chatting as they waited by their animals.

Goldy and Old Heart 7, Buck's chunky gray mustang, had been parked by the line. Hatfield hurried around the block. Finding a passage through he cautiously approached the rear of Wier's building.

"I don't want to run into those dogs," he told Buck. "Mebbe he'll keep 'em inside." A high board fence enclosing the yard blocked him. "Stick here, Buck. I'll go over and see what holds." He slid over the top and keeping in the shadow, made for one of the open office windows.

THE yard seemed deserted. Hatfield squatted by a window, hearing Wier's harsh voice laying down the law.

"You will push the land claims through the courts at once, Taylor. I want Fest and the others on the defensive. It's vital."

"That part's all right," replied Taylor. "We can confuse the issue and even win a decision if I see the judge beforehand. But how do you expect me to touch the Rangers, Baron Wier?"

"You're a lawyer, ain't you?" snapped Wier. "That's what I'm paying you for." In the pause came the faint click of the snuffbox lid. A sniffing and sneezing followed as the Baron took a pinch. "I hate McDowell. I'll get his scalp for that insult. He'll cause me serious trouble. I can't have a troop of his spies snooping around there, not at this moment. I'm going back to Castroville tomorrow and take personal charge."

"Better not monkey with the Rangers," advised the attorney. "The Governor and the A.G. will back 'em up. You should never have approached McDowell without first consultin' me."

"I'll see to the old fool one way or another," fretted Wier.

The wolfhounds had been whining and they made louder and louder, more insistent complaints. This drew Wier's attention. "What's wrong, my beauties?" he asked. He stooped, released the catches of the dogs' leashes. "Sick 'em, Blucher, Bismarck!"

[*Turn page*]

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The powerful, long bodies launched through the open window. They whirled on the Ranger, slashing at him with savage teeth, violently barking. Wier drew a gun, rushing to the spot.

CHAPTER IV

Danger Spot

ONLY Hatfield's extraordinarily swift reactions saved him from being knocked flat and torn to ribbons by the big brutes. They were all around him and he made a lightning draw. His Colt bullet struck the building under the window, the blast turning the wolfhounds for a breath. As they bored in to attack again, he hit one across the muzzle with the gun barrel but the second slashed his arm, tearing the sleeve from his shirt. He kicked out, his spurred boot lifting the beast clear of the ground.

Wier threw up his pistol. The Ranger felt the wind of the whirling slug and the flash momentarily blinded him. The uproar was prodigious as he gripped the top of the fence and with desperate strength pulled up and rolled over. Another missile from Wier's revolver bored through the wooden barrier as he landed on all fours. He jumped up and sped away, the dogs howling and hitting the fence, foiled by its height.

Buck joined him and they hurried to the horses. Blood seeped from the deep tooth marks in Hatfield's arm. Yells and barks sounded from Wier's. The Ranger made an emergency bandage for his wound from a strip of the ruined shirt.

"I'll need a new shirt," he said ruefully. "Those hounds are shore rough."

The dogs had wrecked his chances. The Baron had said he would return to Castroville next day.

"Guess we better head there now," Hatfield decided. "I'll clean up and put on another shirt. And I'll leave a message for Cap'n McDowell, tellin' him to watch out for this Taylor in town."

A day later, they had passed through San Antonio and hit the old wagon trail west. The road skirted the dense, thorned brush country south of the Edwards Plateau. Castroville lay quietly basking in the afternoon sunshine on the bank of the Medina River. From the heights the valley looked most peaceful and it was hard to believe such evil forces could strike here.

Birds and insects hovered over the breaks. On the right the Ranger sighted a deserted woodcutter's *jacal*. "Let's rest up in there till after dark," said Hatfield.

It was the Ranger's habit to move very cautiously in beginning a case. He preferred not to announce his identity until he was in possession of more facts. To protect Buck Robertson he usually stayed apart in public from his youthful aide. And in this way he could use Buck as an observer, a role the boy enjoyed.

Buck dropped Old Heart 7's rein in front of the hut but the Ranger shook his head. "No, *compadre*. Picket him out of sight. No tellin' who may shove along that road."

They dozed and rested in the warmth of the *jacal*. Just before dark fell they heard horses on the road and peeking through cracks in the wall, saw Baron Dolf Wier and a dozen riders pass by at a fast trot. Blucher and Bismarck, the wolfhounds, were running to keep up with the mustangs.

When they had gone by, Hatfield went out to watch. Wier and his men made down the slope to the settlement on the Medina. The spire of several churches rose to the reddening sky. Thick-walled, high-roofed homes crowded close to the walks, structures with tall, narrow dormers and long, arcaded galleries. Castroville had the aspect of a sleepy Alsatian village. Smoke drifted from chimneys. It could have been an ancient Rhine hamlet rather than a Frontier spot.

Hatfield knew something of its history, how Count Henri de Castro, in whose honor it had been named, had visited Texas in 1842. De Castro had found the young Republic glad to present large tracts of land to leaders who could bring in settlers. Castro had met President Sam Houston and secured a colonization contract. He chose his first recruits in Alsace. In November, 1842, over a hundred men, women and children had set sail. Castro remained in Europe to gather more. It was not until 1844 that the leader had arrived.

THE vanguard had settled on the west bank of the Medina River in a pecan grove. Many of the stately trees were still standing. The home makers had gone about the stupendous task of converting wilderness into a civilized community.

Indians had attacked them as they grubbed out roots, cleared brush and built shelters, planted crops and tended animals. Drought, famine and cholera had struck with deadly power. It had been a bitter struggle to subsist. But they had persevered. . . .

When night fell Hatfield and Buck rode into the valley. Here were stores and hotels, dwellings pushed close as though for company in a strange land. Across the low fences of the yards housewives might gossip of a bright morning. The Vance Hotel, on Florence Street, had a high balcony reached by an outside staircase, and Hatfield dismounted, went in to consult a barkeeper.

"Fest's is up the way," he told Buck when he emerged. "We'll go there. Lots of these folks live in town and ride out to work their ranches durin' the day."

A nameplate, *Gaston Fest*, on the gate through a picket fence indicated the place. It was an Alsatian structure with dormers and gallery. Hatfield dropped rein. "Wait a mite, Buck. I'll take a look." He opened the gate and walked to the shadowed porch.

"What yuh want, hombre?" a voice challenged from the darkness.

Hatfield's slim hands were ready near his guns. He had caught the cluck-cluck of a cocking carbine. "Is Mr. Fest around?" he drawled.

"Who wants to know?"

This was scarcely hospitality, either Texan or European. The windows were lighted, the front door stood open. From inside came homely sounds, the appetizing odors of supper. The voices outside brought forth a yellow mongrel of indistinguishable antecedents. This creature's mustard-colored coat was long and silky and a patch of fuzz protruded where the flat skull ran straight back in line with the top of the muzzle, permitting little space for a brain. The dog dashed upon Hatfield.

After his experience with Wier's hounds the Ranger was wary. But the Fest animal was sobbing with pleasure, greeting him with lavish affection although they had never met before. She jumped up, licking his hands, trying to kiss his face.

"Suzette, yuh danged fool, keep down," ordered the gruff voice from the veranda side.

Suzette paid not the slightest heed but tongued the Ranger, making love. Hatfield patted her and she rolled over before him, kicking her legs and whining.

The Ranger decided to take a chance. This was Gaston Fest's and the rancher had been the first to send a complaint to Captain McDowell. "I'm from Austin, suh," he announced to the man in the shadows.

"Oh." The boards creaked and a huge figure slouched, limping a bit, into the light. "We been hopin' yuh'd show up. My handle is Aje Pickett."

Hatfield looked him over in the glow from the house lamps. Pickett was one of the largest young fellows he had ever met. He stood as tall at Hatfield and was fifty pounds heavier. His Stetson was off and tow hair covered his head. His face was open and pleasant. He wore leather pants, spurred halfboots, a blue shirt, cartridge belt and Colt. In one hand, rivaling a ham in size, Pickett gripped a rifle as he might a toy popgun.

"Yuh work for Mr. Fest?" inquired the officer.

"I'm lendin' a hand. They've had a passel of trouble. But come in and see the boss."

Hatfield stepped to the porch, hampered by Suzette's attentions. Her idea of a royal welcome was a full evening's work and she panted and slavered with her violent exertions.

A lean man appeared in the yellow rectangle of the doorway. "Who yuh palaverin' with, Aje? Everything all right?"

"Yes, Mr. Fest. Here's an hombre from Austin."

GASTON Fest was slightly built, with a lean face, hawk nose and keen eyes. His crisp black hair was streaked with gray. He wore Texas garments and his voice had a faint tinge of accent although hardly more than a hint that he he'd been born in Alsace. Gallic as his aspect was, he was bronzed by the Southwest sun and winds and thoroughly American.

Fest stared curiously up into the tall visitor's rugged face and held out his hand. "Glad yuh're here, suh."

"Cap'n McDowell sent me, suh. He's chief of Rangers. I'm here to see what I can do for yuh. My handle is Jim Hatfield."

"Yuh're mighty welcome," answered Fest, as they shook hands. "Please come in. We're just sittin' down to supper. Poor as our fare is, we'll be delighted to have yuh."

"Don't let him fool yuh," said Pickett with a grin. "Madame Fest and her daughter are the best cooks in Texas, Ranger, and that means the world."

"*Gracias,*" said Hatfield. "I got a young pard out there holdin' the horses. I'd like to fetch 'em off the road."

"Of course. Let's give a boost, Aje."

The gate was held back while Buck and Hatfield led their mounts through and to the back yard where stood a stable and corral. They unsaddled, assisted by Pickett and Fest, rubbed down their mounts. Fest escorted them into the roomy kitchen, warm from the wood stove and redolent with appetizing odors. Two women were busily engaged taking up the evening meal. One was middle-aged and buxom, with pink cheeks and graying hair. The second was slim and very pretty with curly black tresses and dancing, lively eyes. She wore a white apron over her blue dress. Her full red lips parted in a smile as Fest introduced the visitors.

To Hatfield's relief Suzette transferred her affections to Buck who was delighted. Soon Fest's wife, Madame Eva, and Colette, the daughter, shooed them into the next room where they sat down at a long board. Two boys, one around twelve, the second two or three years younger, came in. They were Pierre and Alex Fest, sons of the household.

Bright curtains hung at the windows, a canary hopped in a gilded cage, and flowers were arranged in graceful vases. On the walls were religious pictures and about them all the attributes of a home maintained by fine hands. Everything was scrupulously clean. When the roast meat, with a tasty, appetizing sauce, was set before them, the Ranger knew they were in luck. Pickett was right. The Fest women were the best of cooks. Home-made bread and butter, wild-cherry preserves, vegetables, coffee and cream were served them, with other delicacies. Hatfield and Buck, Pickett and the boys fell to with hearty abandon. Eva and Colette joined them for the repast, beaming upon them.

As they enjoyed the food, Fest explained the trouble which had come upon them, while Pickett, mouth full, now and then grunted corroboration. The Castroville ranchers had their spreads outside town. They had needed money and had banded together, collected a combined herd to be driven up the trail and sold on shares in Kansas. Pickett had come to warn them about Bandolier Ed Tully and his rustlers but the thieves had struck hard in broad daylight before the owners could make ready.

The handful of cattle men had been driven to cover and the cattle stampeded. Pickett and two others had been slashed by flying lead. Aje was still limping with a wound in the calf of his leg. Later, Fest had rallied his friends and they had set out after the bandits. But night had fallen and the stolen beefs had been driven into the dense bush country to the south. Tully had left drygulchers hidden on the trail. In the narrow, winding tunnels, crisscrossed by hoofmarks of thousands of horses and cows, the ranchers had been unable to locate the herd. A cowboy had been shot dead as he hunted sign. And after several more had nearly been killed, Fest had called off the search.

"I believe the herd is still hidden in there," said Gaston Fest. "We've had watchers posted in the hills in case Tully tries to bring the cows out. Our range is nearly cleaned out of marketable stuff. Breeders and culls are around but it's a terrible blow. We needed the money to keep operatin'. We had two bad years in a row and now this."

"Have yuh seen Tully since he run off yore cattle?" asked Hatfield.

Pickett spoke up. "We ain't spotted the sidewinder though I believe he comes in late now and then to Otto Schorp's *Biergarten.* I went there with Tully, savvy?"

"How about Baron Wier?"

Fest frowned and Pickett choked on his mouthful.

"Aje saw the Baron talkin' with Tully and Schorp one evenin'," explained Fest. "None of us goes to Schorp's any more but the Baron lives there when he's in

town. Schorp boasts about his noble visitor."

While they suspected Wier and Schorp, they had nothing definite to go on. It was said that Wier was filing claims to the range around Castroville but Fest could not guess why the man was behaving as he did. "He's a mean hombre," said Fest, sadly shaking his head.

CHAPTER V

"He's a Spy"

AFTER supper, Hatfield planned his first move. They smoked on the porch and talked things over. Castroville's mellow lights glowed, the homes cozy in the night. Down the way they heard the music of a violin and accordion. Colette and her mother came out when they finished cleaning up. The young woman sat beside Aje Pickett and it was obvious the two were very much interested in one another. Buck and Suzette, with the Fest boys, rollicked and roughhoused in the yard. . . .

It was late when the tall Ranger approached the entrance to Otto Schorp's *Biergarten*, set off by itself at the north end of town. Buck lurked out in the shadows, holding the horses. The building was of German piecework, its ribs filled with wood and stone. There was a spacious garden and yard to the rear, walled high with brick, sharp spikes set in the barrier's top. Dark bulks of a barn and sheds loomed on the back street.

The main door on the road was ajar and Hatfield stepped into the bar, which had a counter, tables and benches standing in the sawdust. He could see a winding staircase leading to the second story and looked through to the garden, lighted with hanging lanterns. It was a spacious, rambling establishment.

Castroville retired early and only a few citizens still remained in Schorp's. Fest had described the proprietor and the Ranger recognized Otto Schorp easily. Schorp wore a leather apron. His carpet slippers pattered as he shuffled up the bar, staring at the newcomer.

Hatfield did not see Wier but several of the drinkers were armed fellows who had passed the *jacal* late that afternoon.

"What can I do for you, sir?" inquired Schorp, in a thick voice.

"I'm plumb wore out, mister," answered the Ranger coolly. "Come all the way from Uvalde without a stop. I need a drink and I'd like a room for the night."

Schorp reached over and pushed a bottle and glass to him. "Drink. But I have no rooms, they are filled up. You're a stranger, *ja?*"

"Yes, suh. On the road for San Antonio. Nice place yuh got here."

Schorp nodded and puffed at his pipe, leaning on a fat elbow.

Schorp accepted him at his word. The Baron's men eyed Hatfield but he took his time over his drink, chatting about the price of beef and the condition of the road from the west. The innkeeper was formally polite but preoccupied and kept nervously glancing at the stairs.

Several stout German burghers came from the garden and started out. "*Auf Wiedersehen*, Otto."

A Swiss cuckoo clock hung behind the bar clicked and the mechanical bird jumped out to announce it was twelve o'clock. Schorp moved around the end of the bar and stood by the front door.

"Sir, after midnight I do not serve," he said to the Ranger.

Hatfield failed to take the hint. Wier's toughs did not budge and neither did he.

"Good-by, sir," insisted Schorp.

Someone was coming down the steps. Schorp grew alert and Hatfield glanced over his shoulder to see Dolf Wier descending, the shaggy wolfhounds on chains at his heels. Wier carried his slender cane and his dark head was bare. The massive jaw stuck out.

Schorp quickly shut the door. Wier paused at the foot of the stairs, looking around the room. His eyes were haughty and contemptuous as he studied the tall stranger slouched over the counter. He had never seen Hatfield and he had no inkling the big fellow was a Ranger.

The Baron started to cross to the bar but the savage dogs suddenly lunged toward Hatfield. Wier was almost jerked off his feet. He swore at them as they snarled and howled, trying to reach the officer.

"Down, down!" roared the Baron,

swearing at Blucher and Bismarck, but the wolfhounds had caught the enemy scent. They had encountered Hatfield in the yard outside Wier's Austin quarters and were insistent in their warning.

A SHARP rap with a gun butt on the front door caused Otto Schorp to turn and open it again. In came a rangy man with reddish hair under his red-topped Stetson, bandoliers bristling with brass shells crossed over a bony torso and heavy pistols in the black holsters. His florid face was freckled and a scar across his right cheek pulled up one side of his mouth so that he seemed to wear a perpetual grin.

"Bandolier Tully!" thought the Ranger, bracing himself for trouble.

Behind Tully were more rustlers, some in leather, others dark of face and wearing Mexican garments and sombreros. They completely blocked the way out.

The wolfhounds were dragging Wier along, scratching back sawdust as they strained to get at Hatfield. The Baron's suspicion was aroused. "Who are you, sir?" he demanded. "My dogs know you and hate you." To Schorp he called, "Are you acquainted with this fellow, Otto?"

"No, Your Excellency," answered Schorp. "Him I never before saw. From the west, he claims."

Wier was alert. He knew that complaints had been sent to the Rangers and from the brush at McDowell's he was forewarned though he had not previously met Hatfield.

"Perhaps he is a spy," cried Wier sharply. "Search him, Tully!"

Hatfield could not afford to let these men disarm him and go through his pockets. Though he wore no uniform and no badge to prove he was a state officer, snugged in a secret pocket of his shirt was the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Ranger. Bandolier Ed Tully was a known outlaw and from what Hatfield had so far learned of Wier, the Baron was an even more dangerous antagonist. They would make short work of him.

Wier and his savage dogs, the bodyguard which had escorted Wier from the capital, were on one side, Bandolier Tully and his bunch on the other. The cane jumped to the Baron's hand and he touched the spring catch in the head. With a click the sheath slid free, exposing the rapier blade with stiletto point. The wolfhounds leaped at Hatfield, their ferocious snarling filling the room. With blazing eyes, Wier's sword threatened the Ranger.

Bandolier Ed Tully was going for his Colt. Otto Schorp's quivering chin dropped and he gulped in fright, trembling violently at the startling clash.

Hatfield was cool and no panic tensed his muscles when he needed to act with precise speed. Tully was at his left, the Baron at his right, the bar behind him.

The Ranger revolver flicked out with the effect of legerdemain, the heavy gun cocking by its own weight with Hatfield's thumb joint hooked in the hammer spur. At the same instant he pushed on the counter with his left hand and flipped himself to a sitting position, then to a crouch. He was facing them, with the muzzle on Baron Wier.

"Hold up, Wier," he ordered coldly. "Yuh go first."

The Baron stopped, jerking back on the wolfhounds. Hatfield jumped behind the bar, keeping Wier covered.

"Do not shoot," cried the Baron. "Tully, careful!"

Bandolier Ed's grin stuck on his freckled face. His hand gripped one of his pistols yet the Ranger Colt was steady, the tall man grim and impressive. If Tully drew and fired he might make a hit but if it wasn't instantly fatal the man behind the bar could take Wier along and perhaps Bandolier Ed before he fell. The other ruffians froze, waiting for Tully or the Baron to open the ball.

Wier's head slowly pivoted on his thick neck as he watched Hatfield glide to the rear. There was a gap between the counter end and the door leading to the kitchens and *Biergarten.* The Ranger sensed this as a crucial point. Hostile eyes glared at him and though they were not certain of what he was they knew he was a dangerous foe. He would have to turn when he jumped for the exit and then they would try for him.

WIER'S hands were occupied by the taut chain leashes and the sword cane. But Bandolier Tully was a quick-draw artist and ready to shoot. To gain

the breath needed, Hatfield threw a slug at Tully, as he bounded through the door.

The slug was so close it nipped Tully's hat crown. Bandolier Ed flinched at the roar of the explosion and the whine of the bullet. He ripped out a gun but had lost the vital breath needed for a hit. Tully's answering lead cut a long splinter from the edge of the slamming door.

Wier had fallen back, letting go of the leashes as he howled in startled fury. "Get him! Shoot him down. Spy!"

They began churning around and a blast of metal ripped the panels but Hatfield was running into the lighted garden. It was deserted and to his left he saw a closed gate, made for it, looking back over a hunched shoulder, revolver cocked in his hand.

The gate was bolted on the inside. He slid the iron bar back and jumped out, aware of the wolfhounds' baying. Blucher and Bismarck tore into the garden, sighted their quarry and made for him in a mad rush but he pulled the gate to after him, the latch holding against the animals.

The dogs were a few jumps ahead of Tully and the armed toughs on the Ranger's trail. Confused shouting placed them.

"Jim! Are yuh hurt?" That was Buck Robertson, astride Old Heart 7, leading the golden sorrel.

Hatfield threw a long leg over his saddle, settling in the seat. "I'm fine, Buck. Come on, ride!" The swift mustangs whirled them into the darkness, away from there. "Those hounds are a cussed nuisance," muttered the Ranger. His left arm was still stiff and sore from the worrying the savage beasts had given him in Austin and they had nearly caused his death at Schorp's.

CHAPTER VI

A Scouting Expedition

THAT night they spent in the woods near the Medina, above Castroville. It was early, the sun just coming up behind them as they fixed a snack and saddled their horses, intending to acquaint themselves with the surrounding range.

"Now for a looksee," said Hatfield.

They rode out of the river valley and from the heights could see over the country, glimpse the spires and dormers of the settlement, the wooded hills, the cleared ranch land sweeping northward. Here and there they sighted small groups of cattle grazing in the cool morning but these must be culls and breeders, for the ranchers had lost most of their marketable beeves to the thieves.

East and west the beaten highway wound over hill and dale, twisting to run through the towns. South of this lay the thorned jungle, the Big Thicket. Hatfield had had plenty of experience in such terrain on other occasions. He knew the difficulty of operating through those blind, narrow tunnels. Men could conceal themselves and hunters could pass within a few yards of their quarry without being aware of it. Ambush was simple. The person moving could be heard coming and there was no way to guard against a shot from the leafy walls.

"Yuh say yuh had a peek at Bandolier Ed Tully?" asked the Ranger.

"When Schorp's door opened the light fell right on Tully," replied Buck. He's the tall hombre with the scar on his face."

"Right. Yuh got sharp eyes, *compadre*. I s'pose yuh'd savvy the cuss if yuh spy him again?"

"I shore would." Buck waited to learn what was going on inside his mentor's shrewd head.

"We got to recover that combined herd for these folks, Buck. They had a couple of lean years and they need what they'll realize on the sale of their cows. Otherwise Wier will have the jump on 'em, savvy? They'll be pushed to the wall."

"What makes yuh think the rustlers didn't run those steers right off to market?"

"Accordin' to what Fest and Pickett told me, the thieves plunged into the chaparral. They had to, since they knew pursuit would be organized pronto. Well, they couldn't drive south, it's too far to any place that way and the Thicket's a real barrier. Fest and his pards been watchin' and so far Tully ain't moved into the open. If I was holdin' that herd I'd lie low till things blew over a bit, then try to sell the cattle in or near San Antonio to drovers on the way to Kansas. It's the easiest way to turn that meat into cash.

Pickett said that Tully aimed to drive north but the situation changed. Bandolier Ed had to strike in daylight. He had no start, had to make the jungle pronto. With war openly declared, I reckon Baron Wier would order Tully to keep every possible fighter on deck for the showdown."

"Sounds logical," nodded Buck.

"Here's where yuh come on. Hide out where yuh can watch the approaches to the bush. Tully and his boys are slippin' into Castroville nights. They'll get careless and sooner or later show. Some were at Schorp's last evenin', they got to return to their hidden camp, if they ain't already made it. Yuh may spot Tully on his way in. Don't take any chances if yuh can help it. Keep yore eye peeled and if yuh learn anything, report in at Fest's."

Fully instructed and with iron rations in his saddle-bags, Buck Robertson said *adios* to his tall friend and rode off toward the dusty-roofed Thicket south of the highway. Hatfield kept on, acquainting himself with the range.

The sun was golden and well up in the sky when he sighted a group standing by their mounts close to a large barn with some corrals adjacent to it. He sang out and they turned to watch him, obviously alert. Aje Pickett and Gaston Fest were among them and recognized the Ranger, waving him in.

SOBER eyes studied the powerful, rugged officer as he slid from his saddle. Fest did the honors.

"This is our friend, who's come to help us," said the rancher. He indicated each one as he introduced Hatfield. "Etienne Dupres, Georges Briot."

Dupres was short and thickset, with dark hair and mustache, Briot slight, quick of movement, with a ready smile. Fritz Frolicher and his two sons were Swiss, blond giants, splendid specimens. Frolicher was nearing seventy but scarcely showed his age. Gray tinged his beard and there were wrinkles in his pleasant, determined face but he was erect and unbowed. He had been among the first groups of colonists to Texas and had known Count Henry Castro, the great man who had brought them here to escape oppression in Europe.

Hans Mohler was broad and physically powerful as an ox. Jean Legere was a Gallic type with expressive eyes, a shrug that spoke louder than words. Save for Frolicher they were sons and law-abiding. Alsatian, Swiss, German and such Central European strains were dominant but they had melded into Americans, helping one another in trouble, celebrating holidays and birthdays together, intermarrying.

These were the owners of the stolen cattle. They had been counting on the cash they would obtain and it had been a hard blow to lose so many steers. They had been working for weeks to get the herd ready for the drive up the Trail to Kansas railhead. As did Gaston Fest, they had their homes in Castroville, riding out to their ranches each morning. They held title to their lands, which they or their fathers had homesteaded or bought in section by section as they were able.

"Cap'n McDowell was right," mused Hatfield, as he shook hands with the men of Castroville. "They deserve help. Wier's out to wreck 'em."

A slim rider in blue levis and shirt came up, a cream-colored Stetson strapped to a curly head. Hatfield thought it a youth but then he realized it was Colette Fest, smiling at him. She rode with a man's skill and daring, handling the spirited mustang with expert grace. Aje Pickett grinned at her, sidling his big horse to her side.

"Gents," began Hatfield. "I'll do the best I can. Yuh savvy I'm on deck to lend a helpin' hand. Last night I tangled with Bandolier Ed Tully and Baron Wier at Schorp's beer parlor. I also run into Wier before leavin' Austin. I like to work on the quiet, till I get a clear picture but Wier's on the lookout, mebbe has already guessed what I am. Fest sent a complaint to headquarters and the Baron figgers the Rangers will be along."

They stared at the silver star on silver circle, cupped in the slim hand. "I'm Ranger Jim Hatfield. Yuh can keep it to yoreselves, though in this case I guess it don't make too much difference, with Wier on the prod. He tried to bribe us, which don't work, and he's got a fancy lawyer in the capital to make legal claims to yore lands."

The listening ranchers exchanged worried glances. "I don't like that last," mur-

mured Frolicher. "Courts and lawyers mean money and we haven't got it."

"Wier counts on that. Yuh must see there's more to this than just runnin' off yore beeves. From where I sit, it looks as though Wier had hired Tully's bunch to steal yore cows so's yuh'd be pushed to the wall and give in easier. And then, he can use the rustlers as gunslingers against yuh. Any of yuh know of valuable deposits that might be under this range? I'm tryin' to get a line on what it is Wier's after. Certainly it's not only yore land as such. There's too much space in Texas to fight over, the way Wier's doin'. He's takin' dangerous chances here, stickin' his neck out."

But Gaston Fest and his friends were unable to hazard a guess as to why Baron Dolf Wier had so savagely attacked them. If there were mineral outcroppings they were unaware of them.

"I'll have to hunt around more," said the Ranger. "Mebbe I'll run into somethin' to explain it. First off I thought it might be a road comin' through these parts, for Wier's a civil engineer and has some important contracts to fill. But the east-west highway is public and serves all purposes down this way. I couldn't learn of anything like that here, either, before I left Austin."

"S'ppose I ride with yuh, Ranger?" suggested Gaston Fest. "I can show yuh the country."

"Bueno."

COLETTE said something in a low voice to Pickett. Aje spoke up. "If it's all the same, Mr. Fest, I'll go along."

The young woman was plainly worried about her father, for the enemy had shown a disposition to kill Fest, leader of the Castroville faction opposing Wier.

The three, Fest, Pickett and the Ranger, rode along a trail below the crest of a ridge. They were northwest of Castroville.

"This is my range, actually," explained Fest. "On the other side of the ridge lies Frolicher's but we don't fence our lands, we share them. East belongs to Briot, above that is Dupres' sections, and so on."

"Fine grass," nodded Hatfield. "And yuh got good protection from northers. How's the water?"

"Excellent," replied Gaston Fest. "The river and its feeders furnish plenty."

The Medina valley was beautiful, stretching north and south, offering the vital fluid required by men and their food animals. The pastures had been cleared and were diligently kept free of mesquite and other nuisance growths which tended to kill off nutritious grasses. Prickly pears, the graceful wands of ocotillos, and other forms of cactus showed in dry bottoms.

A mile up the line, Hatfield pointed across the wide valley sweep. 'What's that bare spot, Mr. Fest?"

"A dead area, some kind of bog," replied the rancher. "They are here and there over the range. Now and then we have to pull a cow out, or lose an animal in one."

Small bunches of cattle were visible, grazing on the natural fodder. They swung down a long, gentle slope, and Hatfield stopped to study gray rocks thrusting from the surface. Pickett rolled a smoke and lighted up, waiting patiently with Fest while the officer looked over the outcropping.

Something whirled between them. It sounded like a giant wasp, but it plunked into the loose soil, kicking up a spurt.

"That was a heavy rifle slug," cried Hatfield, taking to his saddle.

From a brush-fringed gap south, which they had passed not long before, issued a dozen horsemen. One look was enough.

"That's Bandolier Ed Tully!" shouted Pickett, pulling his carbine and cocking it.

CHAPTER VII

Chase

TULLY was coming for them, shooting at long range. The rustlers must have been hidden in the cross gully, perhaps in camp, and had heard them passing.

Bandolier Ed recognized his three enemies; Gaston Fest, Aje Pickett, for whom he would ever hold bitter hatred, and the tall fellow who had come snooping around Otto Schorp's biergarten. Hatfield had outshot Tully, beaten the bandits to it, and such a defeat was not to

be accepted lightly by killers of Tully's stamp. And no doubt Bandolier Ed still smarted from what Baron Wier had had to say about the affair.

Tully's first maneuver was a rapid dash which brought him and his followers between their prey and home. They were cut off from Castroville. Then the rustlers swerved in and came straight at the three men.

With Bandolier Ed were the desperadoes who had come to Schorp's door. "Guess they ain't been home yet," decided Hatfield, glancing back over a hunched shoulder as he urged Goldy along.

They could have whooped it up at Schorp's till dawn or they might have tried to trail the tall intruder from the *Biergarten* and so been caught away from home base. At any rate the chance was too tempting for Tully to pass up. If he could overtake them, he would kill three most dangerous birds in one swoop.

Bandolier Ed realized his luck in running on them and he flogged his horse, cursing his riders to high speed. Now and again a long rifle would be fired in the hope of a chance strike but the jogging mustangs did not offer a steady base from which to take aim.

The fugitives were forced northward, driving hard to gain a start. Gaston Fest and Aje Pickett were off on the Ranger's sight. Goldy's beating hoofs began to sink and suck in the earth. The big sorrel slowed, showing difficulty in maintaining the pace. Tully and his men were picking up yards on Hatfield and began howling in triumph.

"Over this way," bawled Fest. He swung his mount, losing speed as he called to the Ranger, alarm in his voice. "Get out of there, yuh'll sink deep if yuh hit a real soft spot!"

Pickett pulled around too. Fest and the huge cowboy banged away with Colts at the rustlers, who were coming in a mad rush. Tully's bunch opened full blast with pistols and carbines. Metal shrieked about the tall officer, who had his hands full as he sought to guide Goldy.

The powerful gelding fought every step, helped by the lift on his rein. The muck was like glue. For anxious moments Goldy hunted for sure footing. Fest and Pickett would not desert their friend and the three were in mortal danger, out in the open and against four-to-one odds.

It was with real relief that Hatfield felt his horse suddenly spring off, released from the drag. On hard ground Goldy streaked away, soon catching up with Pickett and the rancher. The three gained speed and dashed on while disappointed yowls issued from Bandolier's burly throat.

They galloped up the valley, the Medina on their right and a serrated line of ridges marking the rim on the left. After that first close shave the chase settled to a dogged marathon, the bandits hoping that one of the trio's animals might fall or break through the crust and go down. The rustlers could not all maintain the pace set, for Fest and Pickett were on superior animals as well as the Ranger.

A mile up the line Bandolier Tully and a bearded outlaw had pulled ahead of the pack. Hatfield dropped back a bit, drawing a revolver and cocking it. He looked around. Tully was low over his long-legged black, spurs raking the barrel ribs. The Ranger rested the Colt on his raised left arm and let go.

Tully jumped. That lead was too intimate for comfort. He glanced back, saw he had stretched his neck out too far and slowed, allowing the rest to close up. Bandolier Ed knew that he must attack in mass and he did not again try to overtake the Ranger and his friends, without his band to assist in the fight.

A HORSE could gallop just so far and then must slow. The dashing speed diminished and became a trot. Lather stood out on the mustangs. The outlaws stopped quirting and spurring, resigned to a long run.

The sun was very hot and the heated air shimmered from the ground in visible waves. Far to the south a haze hung over the chaparral. They were many miles from Castroville. But Tully hated to quit and he stuck to the trail, the dust rolling from shod hoofs.

"Yuh can't say we haven't showed yuh plenty of the range," smiled Gaston Fest.

Pickett laughed. "Shore we have, Ranger, and it ain't been too dull, either."

First things came first. They must shake off Tully and his gunslingers now.

They came to the point where the horses of both factions could only walk. The three were out of gun reach and watching back from one of the wavelike rises of the terrain, Hatfield saw Bandolier Ed had pulled up, his men grouping around him.

Fest and Picket swung with him to watch the enemy. Tully and some of them fired futile shots and howled insults but they were too far off for either to touch the trio. The outlaws dismounted and stretched their legs, rolling smokes. The light flashed on the glass of the flasks they consulted.

The fugitives had a drink from their canteens. The sun was dropping in the western sky.

"Horses are tuckered, gents," said the Ranger. "We got to give 'em a breather, that's a cinch."

They kept an eye on Tully. The bandits were in no hurry but lounged near their animals, smoking, drinking and talking together.

At sundown they were still squatted there between the three and home. "I'm in favor of holin' up in the hills for the night," advised Hatfield. "Tully could string out his hands and mebbe we'd run into 'em in the dark."

On fatigued mounts it would be nip-and-tuck in such a situation and there was little to be gained by a dash back to Castroville. Fest assumed the lead as they mounted and rode slowly up a slope, slanting into the rising country. Just before dark they reached a small pool where a rill came from the split rocks. Checking up, Hatfield found that Tully had not come after them, and so they unsaddled, began rubbing down the animals, with Fest standing guard on a high point.

The Ranger took extra special care with Goldy. He cleaned the sorrel's golden coat, and extracted stickers from the long, silky tail. Aje Pickett groomed his own and Fest's horse.

Hatfield carried a brush for his gelding. He wet it to remove the dust coating Goldy's legs while the sorrel pulled off mouthfuls of green leaves from a nearby tree, enjoying a bite to eat, swishing his tail. The rubdown made Goldy feel frisky and he shivered with pleasure, nuzzling his human friend.

But brush as he would, Hatfield could not make much impression on the grayish-black substance stuck to Goldy's hocks and hoofs.

"Doggone, this stuff won't come off for love or money, Aje," he remarked.

Dark fell over the land. It was never wise to camp beside water for wild animals and men would come there if they came anywhere so the three moved off a short distance, picketed their horses and chewed on dried beef strips and hardtack, washed down by gulps of spring water.

"It don't taste like Madame's and Collette's cookin'," complained Aje Pickett, who had appetite to match his size. "I reckon they got me spoiled."

"I'll stand first guard tour," offered the Ranger. "Yuh two get some shuteye."

They took turns at sentry duty through the night but there was no alarm. In the gray dawn they saddled their mustangs and carefully watching for Bandolier Tully, started for Castroville. They crossed the river to ride down the east bank. At various points they could see long sweeps of range but their enemies had evidently given up hope of catching them, and they did not bump into Tully and his hands.

THE SUN climbed into the sky. They were not far out of the settlement when they sighted three horsemen who swerved and waved to them.

"It's the Frolichers," said Gaston Fest.

Soon they joined their friends. Fritz Frolicher beamed on them, delighted to have found them. His two powerful sons were by their sire. Fred and Kurt Frolicher were replicas of their father, upstanding young fellows with old-world training and manners.

"We have been hunting you, Gaston. Others are searching, too," explained Fritz. "When you didn't come home last night Madame Fest grew frightened and sent for me. I organized the search."

Fritz Frolicher despatched his boys to round up the ranchers and cowboys who were combing the bush and hills for the missing trio. He rode with Fest while the latter described the encounter with Bandolier Tully and the long chase which had kept them away overnight.

Castroville basked quietly in the afternoon sunlight. North of town, boys were splashing about in the swimming hole at the Medina's bend. The thick-walled,

dormered homes kept cool inside and older folks who did not have business to attend to, remained indoors during the worst of the day's heat. Stores and saloons were open for business but the town seemed peaceful, with no hint of the explosion threatening it. Schorp's *Biergarten,* north of the settlement from Fest's, looked innocent enough, the high garden wall stretched behind the building.

"Wonder where Wier is?" murmured Hatfield, watching Schorp's as they passed the *Biergarten* on the way down the main thoroughfare.

Madame and Colette Fest were waiting. They cried for joy and Eva Fest threw her arms about her husband, Colette kissed her father, smiling on Aje Pickett. Alex and Pierre, the two boys, rushed in, Suzette at their heels. The dog plunged into the center of the family reunion, jumping up and down, wagging her whole body and whining in excited joy.

Hatfield went to care for his sorrel. He gave Goldy a thorough grooming with Fest's combs and brushes at the stable in the back yard. He studied the grayish-black stuff which still resisted his efforts to clean it off the gelding's lower legs. Pickett worked on the other two horses and soon Gaston Fest came to join them.

They were still at this when an elderly man with a white goatee and mustache, wearing a nickel-plated badge pinned to his blue shirt, his bowed legs thrust into worn black pants and with runover half-boots, came through from the street and approached Fest. He was over seventy, decided the Ranger, as he studied this senile specimen of local law.

"Howdy, Gaston," began the visitor gravely.

"Good evenin', Marshal Kotzenhoff," replied Fest politely. "Yuh must come in and have a bottle of wine with us."

"First off I got to tend to business. I hate to bring yuh bad news, Gaston, but it's my duty. This is a court order sayin' yuh must appear to show cause why Baron Dolf Wier's claim on yore lands shouldn't be granted, savvy? It goes for Fritz Frolicher and several of yore pards."

Kotzenhoff cleared his scrawny throat and self-importantly produced a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles which after a struggle he managed to affix to his nose. From his back pocket he drew an official document which he read word by word in a laborious, halting manner. The gist of it was that Dolf Wier had filed suits against the Castroville ranchers and they must make a legal fight to save themselves.

CHAPTER VIII

Stolen Herd

WHEN the marshal left, an hour later, climbing on his old horse to continue the rounds of those concerned, Hatfield spoke with Gaston Fest. "That's all yuh got here in the way of officers?"

"That's our police force." Fest smiled rather sadly. "We are law-abiding people, Ranger. Or we were, till Wier came along." Fest was angry inside. Against his will, without having harmed anybody, he and his friends had been dragged into a deadly conflict. Not only their properties but their lives were in danger.

Night fell over them. They were at supper when Suzette, who was an inveterate and shameless beggar at table, woofed and tore to the back door. Alex Fest was on guard at the rear and had passed whoever it was coming in.

Hatfield glanced at the back door. Buck Robertson, his young face stained with dirt and showing the effects of a tough ride, came in, Suzette all over him.

"Buck! What yuh got?" asked Hatfield.

"I found the herd!" cried Buck, his eyes sparkling. "Bandolier Tully and a dozen gunhands rode right past where I was hidden, early this mornin'. They were cursin' and plumb wore out, and didn't do much watchin' on their back trail."

Fest exclaimed in excited delight. "Good boy. Can yuh lead us there?"

"*Si.* I couldn't get too close but I'm shore they're holdin' yore cows in a spot I can show yuh. Say, I'm starvin'."

Madame Eva led him to a chair and plied him with food. While Buck ate his meal, Fest and Hatfield consulted.

"Tully was on the way back from chasin' us," the Ranger said with a nod. "After they've rested up, mebbe he'll sashay out again. S'pose we get our party

together and hide where we can watch?"

Messengers were despatched to Fest's associates, telling them of the rendezvous, which was set a mile west of Castroville. There might well be spies observing Fest's home for any concentration of the cowmen's forces. Otto Schorp would be watching for enemy activity in Baron Wier's behalf.

Buck led the way on the moonlit highway, Hatfield and Gaston Fest, the Frolichers, Briot, Legere and the others riding quietly behind the chiefs. Aje Pickett was there, and those interested in saving the stolen herd. Bandolier Tully, with his allies, outnumbered them, and Wier had brought a party of picked toughs from Austin. Yet Hatfield hoped to accomplish by guile what he might not succeed in doing by sheer force.

Around a horseshoe bend by which point Buck was able to orient himself, the youth stopped Old Heart 7 They were ten miles west of Castroville.

"Here's one of their blind entrances, Jim," announced the youth.

In the silvery glow it was but a black shadow, a narrow gap in the brush which lapped the shoulder of the east-west pike. Mile after mile, southward, stretched the impenetrable areas of the chaparral.

They started through, single file, Hatfield behind Buck. Thorned, whiplike limbs slapped and clutched horses and riders. As it grew higher, in spots completely roofing the trail, twigs cracked under shod hoofs and it was impossible to move without rustling foliage, dried by summer heat or dead from lack of sunlight.

It was tense traveling. If Bandolier Tully kept his in-trails guarded they might be fired on any instant.

They paused for a breather, the men gripping their carbines ready for a fight. "How much farther?" inquired Hatfield. They had made almost a mile, but at a snail's pace, feeling through the tunnels. Only by a glimpse of the moon as it slowly spanned the heavens could they get a hint as to direction.

"Twice what we've come," replied Buck. "I think they have sentinels near their hideout, Ranger."

It was pitch black save for an occasional streak where the light could filter through. The Big Thicket offered sanctuary to fierce wild swine, to diminutive deer, a species which had accommodated its size to its habitat, to untold rattlers and other snakes, to the *tigres*, as the native mountain lions were called by the Mexicans.

BESIDES these creatures, long-horned cattle that had run away from the ranges years before or even been calved without ever seeing man, infested the Big Thicket. They were as feral and potentially more dangerous than a cougar, lying up during the days and venturing out during the nights to drink and forage as was the custom of wild beasts. They would avoid hunters if possible but if chanced upon would fight with savage ferocity, their pointed, extended horns able to disembowl a horse or man in one vicious thrust.

Distant, vague sounds no doubt indicated that such creatures were not far away, perhaps moving off from their line of march. Insects and birds kept up a steady chirping.

After another hour of it, Hatfield halted them and called a low-voiced conference. "I'm in favor of pushin' into the bush and lyin' up till dawn, gents. If Tully has watchers on the job, we'll run into the cusses shore in the darkness."

They felt for a spot in which to bivouac. Hatfield roped back a wide bush, permitting his friends to lead their mustangs through. He spent half an hour brushing out possible sign on the side of the trail and then joined the others, who had unsaddled, picketed their horses and eaten a cold snack before stretching out to sleep.

The faintness of dawn was over the thickets as Hatfield started awake. He rose, making no sound. About him were his companions, most of them still dreaming. The tall officer listened, catching a few slight warnings. He knelt and put an ear to the ground. It was almost imperceptible jarrings through the earth strata which had come to him and alerted him.

He woke them one by one, a slim hand to the sleeper's mouth so he would not cry out when startled.

"Get to yore horse and keep him quiet. Someone's comin'," he whispered to each man.

Then he crept out and lay flat near the winding, constricted tunnel through which they had come. He was hidden by the

thicket. A dry-pod whirring told him he had disturbed a hunting snake but as he froze and kept still the rattler uncoiled and slowly slid away from his position.

The patient Ranger waited. Half an hour passed before a rider in a steeple sombrero trimmed with pearl buttons, red velvet pants and jacket, passed on the path. Next came Bandolier Ed Tully. Wier's field chief looked back over his shoulder at a white-toothed Mexican in high hat and purple velvet.

"Hey, Gasca. Pass the word back the boys are to shut up. They're makin' too much racket. Yuh never can tell. Them Castroville sidewinders might be huntin' us down here."

Pickett had described Gasca, who had brought a score of gunslingers to supplement Tully's crew. Murphy was present and the Ranger recognized several faces and figures, men he had encountered either at Schorp's or during the run across the range. He kept count. Tully had twenty-five heavily armed outlaws with him. They would be on some mission for Baron Wier, there was little doubt of that.

Not a sound came from the cowmen concealed well off the trail, and Hatfield had done a good job erasing the slight signs made where they had broken in. Bandolier Ed disappeared and his bearded, fierce killers one by one followed after their leader.

"This helps," decided Hatfield as he lay listening to the receding hoofbeats. "If they ain't fetched in more fighters since Pickett was with 'em there shouldn't be more than fifteen or twenty guardin' that herd."

When he was certain the procession was finished he returned to his men.

"Make ready," he warned. "We're goin' in."

Carbines and Colts were checked, spare shells dropped into handy pockets or shoved into belt loops. The light was growing better. Buck wished to stay in front but the Ranger refused.

"Stick behind me," he ordered. "Yuh can guide from there." He was convinced there would be sentries and did not intend to have Buck in the most dangerous position.

On the path they took up the march. After another mile they detected the lowing of cattle to the south. Then the golden sorrel rippled his hide, a warning to his rider. A quick rustle on the right, light glinting on a thrusting rifle barrel, placed the rustler trail guard on the point of firing.

CHAPTER IX

Strike

HATFIELD reacted with blinding speed, lithe muscles and every fiber alert. He ripped at his rein with his left hand, veering Goldy, rearing the sorrel as the rifle roared. He heard the shriek of a heavy bullet past his head and a breath later his Colt belched hot metal. So fast did he shoot that the reports seemed joined together as he dusted that thicket.

A howl and the dropping muzzle of the enemy gun told he had made a hit. Gaston Fest and others were jumping into the argument and their hail of slugs finished the sentry's resistance.

"Come on, boys," yelled the Ranger. "Tie yore hats to the saddle and let's ride!" There was no use in further stealth for the shooting would have been heard at the outlaw bivouac.

He picked up the pace, urging Goldy along, keeping his head low to avoid being swept off by overhanging limbs. Buck and Aje Pickett, Fest and the men of Castroville responded to his inspiring leadership. They rode as though the heel flies were after them, faces flushed with excitement and shrill Rebel yells coming from pulsing throats.

Three hundred yards past the sentry post the narrow tunnel opened into one of the natural clearings found here and there in the Big Thicket. A small tributary of the Medina came in from the southwest, flowing through this opening. At one time there had been a small ranch. Weather-blackened shacks indicated that some brushpopper had settled here before he had broken his neck chasing wild steers through the brush.

The rickety sheds stood against a long, eroded cliff cutting off the clearing on the south. Lush green grasses and low brush grew along the stream. The Ranger saw

picketed mustangs, a crude rack made of a tree trunk supported on crossed posts where hung saddles, supplies and blanket rolls, an outdoor fireplace.

The opening was large and filled with cattle bearing Fest's and other brands. The animals stood in bunches as was their habit, some grazing, others motionless. They overflowed into the woods while a rough fence constructed of long poles cut from the surrounding chaparral enclosed three sides of the square where the terrain would not block escape.

The Ranger could see, in his first glance, that the strung pole barrier disappeared into patches of bush, coming out farther on. The corral was roomy enough to contain the large herd which Tully had run off from the north range. A good deal of the available herbage had been consumed by the cows during the days they had been here.

A gate made of a wooden bar on X uprights blocked the entry. On the south side of the clearing alarmed outlaws up on the shelflike camping site had snatched their carbines and other weapons to defend themselves.

The Ranger slewed Goldy around, kicking at the bar. Aje Pickett, Buck and Gaston Fest, the Frolichers and others slid into a bunch behind Hatfield as he dislodged the barrier. Bullets were singing about them. The nearer steers, after goggling at the intrusion, turned and pushed away from the ruckus, bunching together, complaining at the startling sounds.

Tully's herd guards had caught the shooting from the in-trail. They had been at breakfast. Some had started to saddle their horses but so swift was the approach of the Ranger and his men they were caught off balance. Hatfield, the gate lifted, tore across the beaten earth toward the bivouac, his Colts blaring. The Castroville fighters spread out, determined in their attack, their guns opening in a fearsome blast.

In the morning light the battle was joined. Hatfield reached the picket line and running outlaws retreated to the rock shelves. He saw a couple throw up their hands as they were hit by flying metal. Several began climbing the steep paths to the top of the bluff, seeking escape afoot. The bush came to the lip of the cliffs and the panicked bandits took to it.

HALF a dozen made a determined stand but it did not last long. Crackling guns rose to deafening concert. The opposition melted away into the rocks, those rustlers not badly wounded running for cover.

Buck swooped back to reset the gate bar, hold in the alarmed, nervous cattle.

The fight was quickly over. Dust and powder smoke slowly rolled over the field as the Ranger took stock. A couple of his men had slight flesh wounds while a few had been scratched by clutching thorns on the way in.

"Pick up spare guns and ammunition," commanded Hatfield. "Destroy anything they can use against us, toss it in the creek."

"Let's burn the camp," suggested Georges Briot.

"No," said Hatfield. "The big column of smoke would bring Bandolier Tully and the rest back here on the double."

He rode to the gate, as expert cowmen

[*Turn page*]

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and their aides attempted to calm the excited herd. Some of the cows had started churning around and the frail corral which so far had bluffed them into remaining where they were, would not stand much pressure.

"Here's where they drove 'em in, Buck," he said to his youthful comrade, as he pointed at a wider trail which came from an easterly direction. "Yuh can see that. They only use the path we come on for sallies." He was thinking hard, a plan forming in his quick mind. He beckoned to Gaston Fest, who approached.

"What's the word, Ranger?" asked the Castroville chief.

"Yuh need to save yore herd, Mr. Fest. What yuh aim to do now yuh've found it?"

"I figgered we'd drive back to my ranch and set a strong guard so they can't run 'em off again," answered Fest.

Hatfield shook his head. "I thought of that, too. But it's hard to hold such a collection of balky steers for long. We'd be sittin' ducks for Bandolier Tully and whatever forces he may bring against us."

"What then?" asked Fest curiously.

"This cattle trail tells how they drove in here. Instead of breakin' straight into the bush they must have doubled back east on the beaten road that day, before pushin' into the Thicket. They hid the entrance well. Now, we must shift these cows pronto, before Tully gets back or one of those runnin' fools manages to reach him with the alarm."

"But we can't beat 'em to Kansas," objected Fest. "They'd overtake us, no matter how fast we run. Yuh can push cattle just so far."

"I savvy that. Here's my idea. San Antonio is two days' drive eastward. Yuh can make it there with any luck, especially with some of us holdin' the road. Yuh pick a dozen drovers, youngsters who can stick to a hull forty-eight hours without fallin' off. Take turns but keep the herd movin', no matter what. The steers will lose weight but feedin' later will bring it back. When yuh hit San Antone, hunt up Ken Barnes, of Barnes & Filchard. Tell him I sent yuh. He's an old Ranger and a pard of mine and Cap'n McDowell's. His pens are plenty big for yore herd and he'll furnish armed guards if yuh ask him. Barnes will hold yore beeves or buy them from yuh if yuh prefer, though yuh can't expect as high a price as in Kansas. Either way is better than losin' everything to the rustlers."

Fest's eyes lighted. "Yuh've hit it! I savvy Barnes; he's all right. I've dealt with him before." He pulled rein, swinging his cayuse to direct operations.

Expert handlers started hazing the herd from the pole corral. The leaders were prevented from breaking off right or left on diverging trails. Point riders led the way while in the beaten track the big animals ambled along, nursed by the cowboys.

Half a mile from the hidden camp a flurry of shouts and gunshots sounded ahead. Hatfield was up there, and the point had run into another of Tully's sentinels on this route. A few exchanges and the hidden rustler made off into the brush.

It was as Hatfield had guessed. The beaten track ran for several miles east to west, below the highway. The sun was high and hot-yellow, beating on the chaparral roof, when he came to the turn north.

HE TROTTED the golden sorrel ahead, reaching a block where limbs and brush filled the trail. He dismounted and began yanking them up. They had been cut by sharp blades and thrust into the loose earth. He worked through to the main highway. Along its margin Tully's crew had cleverly camouflaged the entrance by planting bushes and wiping out all sign beyond the apparently natural wall. The dry condition of the chaparral assisted in the trick and horsemen on the road could easily pass the blind trail without noticing any difference between it and many other sections.

The Ranger quickly cleared the way and with Aje Pickett took a stand just west of the exit. The point men led the steers out. Big cows, shaking their horned heads, pushed through and were turned down the highway.

They forded the Medina after noon. Here was a crucial point for the cutoff along which herds might be driven skirted just below Castroville, within sight of the town. The armed Ranger and half a dozen alert watchers held the junction, ready to blast attackers. But as Hatfield had figured, Bandolier Tully was not in the set-

tlement. He might be along later, after dark, as was his custom.

Up the line, however, he glimpsed the fat figure of Otto Schorp. And when Schorp hurried back into his *Biergarten*, it was to fetch Baron Dolf Wier. For a time Wier stood, watching them from a distance, his wolfhounds leashed at his side.

Several of his bodyguards were on hand but the array of armed fighters told Wier he could not hope to contest the salvaging of the herd.

Urchins hurried from back yards to stare at the long strings of steers trotting on the cutoff, the dust billowing into the hot air. Fest's cowboys were busy guiding the animals and starting them up the long slope from the Medina valley, after the cows had drunk in the river on their way across.

Hatfield spoke with Gaston Fest, who had his picked crew assembled. "All right, Fest. Go to it. The rest of us will hold the back road."

They shook hands and Fest rode off, taking over the driving job with the Frolicher boys and other strong sons of the Castroville ranchers. Aje Pickett went along with them, and Hatfield drew the remainder about him. From the height he could see over the settlement, and Wier was mounting a long-legged black saddle horse in the curb outside Schorp's. His men were with him and they rode north, out of town.

"Goin' to hunt Tully, I s'pose," said the Ranger. "That means a fight, probably tonight, gents."

He would have enjoyed pursuing Wier but first he had to secure the herd, on which depended Castroville's future prosperity.

Along the highway's margin, the Ranger and his fighting men waited, snatching naps or smoking in the darkness. Posted guards were on the road toward Castroville, while out ahead, eastward, Gaston Fest and his cowboys shoved the steers on.

The moon was up, the shadows black where they fell across the open spaces. An owlhoot warned Hatfield something was about to pop. It was near midnight and so far the rustlers had failed to materialize.

Alex Fest and another Castroville lad came tearing up. The keen-eared, sharp-eyed boys had been watching for the enemy. "They're comin'!" cried Alex. "The whole shebang. That Bandolier Tully and Baron Wier are leadin' em."

Hatfield alerted his men. Guns were cocked and raised as the outlaw van surged around the bend.

"Halt!" ordered the Ranger sharply.

Colts flamed. The outlaws pulled rein as they hastily opened fire, whirling back and shouting warnings. Hatfield let go at them and others followed suit, blasting the highway.

CHAPTER X

Retreat

LEAD singing in their ears convinced Wier and Tully that they had overtaken the drag riders of the Castroville herd. The Ranger heard sharp commands ringing out as the enemy formed for the attack. The moon cast its silver light, touching the rugged face of the big officer, waiting with heavy Colt in one hand, staring at the blank space marking the turn of the road.

"Stand to horse," he ordered. "And look out for men creepin' along the sides behind yuh."

A howling, shooting group of Tully's desperadoes whipped toward them but though they made a great deal of noise they did not dare swing into sight against the dangerous fire from Hatfield and his hard-bitten crew. Buck Robertson had strict orders to stay back out of sight. He had proved very valuable so far in the investigation and there was no telling when the Ranger might need the youth again. Hatfield preferred to keep Buck out of the public eye, unmarked by the foe.

Yells and sudden gunshots on the right told that Wier had sent killers shoving through the woods lining the road.

"Scatter!" bellowed the Ranger. He leaped to his saddle and they left there hurriedly before the wings could enclose them.

Half a mile eastward, the officer called a halt and at a handy bend in the highway set another ambush. They had a while in which to catch their breath and smoke,

enjoy a drink of water from their canteens. Hatfield watched for the enemy approach, chinstrap taut under his determined jaw. He meant to give Gaston Fest plenty of time in which to reach San Antonio with the steers.

"They ain't in such a hurry now," he told Jean Legere. "They'll be spooky at every bend and dark spot, so they'll make a plumb careful check before they dare ride through."

At last the rustler point appeared on the trail. This time only a couple of them showed, feeling a way.

"Pull up!" snapped Hatfield. The Rangers always gave warning before they opened fire, even to the worst outlaws. The scouts jerked their reins and broke into the brush along the margins, calling to the main band, led by Wier and Tully.

This was Hatfield's game, of retreat, stand until the pressure grew too great, then run a little farther. Wier was forced to play it and the night frittered away with neither side doing much damage. Time was what the Ranger wanted.

The gray dawn finally filtered over the wilds. In the growing light, the hide-and-seek became more perilous to both factions. Hatfield baited a last trap at a bend but with the daylight Wier had his advance riders skirting through the chaparral.

Etienne Dupres, one of the Castroville ranchers, was slashed in the arm by a flying slug. The Ranger pulled them out of there in a hurry, running a full mile before calling a halt. He looked over his contingent in the morning glow. Eyes were red from lack of sleep and from grit, faces stained and drawn. Dupres' arm kept oozing blood in spite of the emergency bandage. The mustangs were lathered and their coats roughed by burrs and dirt.

Now they rested at a high point and could see the black trail as well as some distance on the road to San Antonio. Miles eastward a haze overhung the highway, slowly forming at its head as the tail gradually dissipated in a faint breeze which had sprung up at dawn.

"That's the herd, boys," said the Ranger. "They'll make it by night."

A full day of intense heat, fighting Wier and Tully, faced them. Tired as they were, they must hold the line for Fest and the drovers up there.

"Here they come, Jim," announced Buck, pointing west.

Hatfield swung to observe Wier's leaders. They were shoving through, stubbornly snarling at his heels, watching for drygulchers, for the Ranger tactics had shaken the gunhands.

"I want yuh to keep out of their sight," he reminded Buck, gravely. "I may need yuh, Buck."

The youth preferred to stay in front where the fighting was hottest but the first thing Hatfield had taught him was discipline, to obey commands. He pushed Old Heart 7 into the bush.

SOMEONE sang out another warning. "Here comes a bunch of hombres from San Antonio, Ranger!"

Hatfield jumped in his leather seat, turning to study the unexpected party coming toward them. If these men were part of Wier's band, who had somehow managed to bypass him, it might mean they had already attacked and scattered Fest's herd. And the Ranger's followers were caught between two fires.

He relaxed a bit as he took in the lines of horsemen. Even at this distance he could see they were not expert riders but handled their slow, tame animals clumsily, jogging along. Pack mules carried equipment, blankets and food, and he could make out the handles of shovels and picks sticking from the loads.

"Come on," he ordered, swinging into the lead.

Closer, he found the clothing of the party was not that of the range. They wore corduroys and felts with straight brims much smaller than the usual Stetson. Their boots were unspurred and while they had a rough-and-ready aspect and carried the usual pistol and rifles in slings, they were not the type who rode with Bandolier Ed Tully.

Curious, the Ranger kept on, watching carefully, for there was no telling when new enemies might appear to reinforce Baron Wier. In the front of the parade was a very wideset man with a black beard and glittering eyes. He was about forty, and one broad, square hand held to his saddlehorn as he bobbed on.

"Good day, suh," he sang out, as Hatfield drew up. They all seemed glad to

pause and pass the time of day, stare at the dusty crew with the tall rider.

"Howdy," replied the Ranger.

"How much farther to Castroville?" asked the wide one.

"Three hours for my horse but most of the afternoon if yuh poke along the way yuh're doin'."

"Well, we ain't rodeo riders, are we, boys?" the leader grinned at his men. "So far we ain't been accused of reckless goin'." When he laughed tobacco-stained front teeth showed and a gap where one was missing. "Cuss it, we bumped into a big trail herd and the road was blocked all night! Had to pull off to let 'em pass. Otherwise we'd be farther along."

"Yuh're movin' nights? What yuh aim to do in Castroville?"

The glittering black eyes narrowed and the wide fellow went shrewd. "That's just our next halt on the trip west, suh."

A whistle from Briot told they had better not dawdle any longer. Hatfield gave a quick nod and the Castroville fighters began skirting the thirty bunched up behind their chief. Each side was alert but neither wished to clash under the circumstances, not sure of just what was up.

Hatfield lagged, making certain all his friends got by. Over a hunched shoulder, down the long west straightaway, he spied Bandolier Ed Tully, Gasca and Wier spurring tired mustangs up the grade. As yet the enemy could not see the newcomers.

A few minutes later the Ranger glanced back as Tully and Wier shouted and waved, sighting the wide man and his cohorts. The Baron's gunslingers pulled up and mingled with the strangers. Wier had words with the blunt leader, gesticulating and pointing after the Castroville defenders.

"I figgered so," muttered Hatfield. "They're more of Wier's men!"

But then the two parties separated, Tully and Wier keeping on the trail after the herd, the others heading west.

Buck had obediently stayed out of the way, keeping to the chaparral fringing the highway. Hatfield rode in and signaled his aide.

"Wait till they've gone by," he ordered. "Then cut back for Castroville and watch that new bunch of Wier's. I'll see yuh soon as we can make it."

Buck shook hands and rode north for a patch of woods while the Ranger slanted to the road and galloped after his friends.

In the hot midday the chase slowed to snail's pace. Horses and men were tuckered and at long range Hatfield snapped at the outlaws. In that hazy heat it was hard for the gasping men to hold their eyes open while all panted with weariness. But the enemy was in the same boat.

NEAR dusk they reached the environs of San Antonio. Gaston Fest and the drovers appeared, coming toward them. Fest waved and shouted and soon the two parties joined and traded notes. "We made it, Ranger," cried Fest. "Turned the cows into Barnes and Filchard's corrals an hour ago. Barnes say he'll pertect 'em."

"*Bueno.* We better hunt a place to snooze before we drop in our tracks."

They were at the end of the tether. Wier and Tully were coming but the ranchers could now desert the road. They made for the tall timber and as night fell, found a camping spot. Unsaddling, picketing their horses, many were asleep as they stretched out.

Next day Jim Hatfield, Gaston Fest and Aje Pickett, out ahead of the party, rose in their saddles as they reached the point on the eastern heights from which they could look down upon Castroville. The sun had been up for some time. Unable as yet to see home, they had watched the rising column of black smoke in the azure sky.

A few hour's sleep in the bush and Hatfield had roused them and swung west. He had believed Wier must take a breather too so that the enemy could not be far ahead.

"Looks like my house is afire," gasped Fest.

"Shore does," growled Pickett. "The cusses beat us back!"

They spurted down the slope. Cold rage flushed the Ranger. Balked by the rescue of the herd, Wier was lashing out with mad abandon, striking at the families of his opponents, destroying their properties. Few outlaws would stoop to such warfare.

Fest and Pickett especially were consumed by a terrible anxiety, wondering at the fate of Madame Eva and Colette while the other ranchers could not tell which building might be next. They

rushed pellmell into Castroville. Up the line they spied bunches of Bandolier Ed Tully's rustlers, some dismounted and holding flaming torches. They recognized Tully and Gasca, and others they had met in battle, but Wier was not in evidence.

Rifle shots crackled. Courageous oldsters, boys and women were trying to hold off the pillagers.

"That's my house," cried Fritz Frolicher. In spite of his age the powerful old Swiss had stood the gaff. "They're tryin' to burn it!"

The pitch torches, hurled at the walls, would catch hold and force out those inside.

At sight of the returning fighters, Bandolier Ed Tully leaped to horse and roared orders. In battle formation the outlaws began to beat a retreat from Castroville, shooting back heavy volleys. They had changed horses, perhaps stolen them from local corrals, while Hatfield's contingent still rode the fagged animals used in the raid on Tully's stronghold and for the run to San Antonio. Bandolier Ed could easily evade pursuit.

Angry men spurred after the killers, seeking to close. Bandolier Ed drew up at the north end behind corner walls which gave plenty of protection while the Castroville ranchers were moving in the open avenue. Lead whistled through the hot air.

Hatfield yelled and signaled for his followers to go back. "Save the town, gents," he shouted. "Form a bucket line to the river, pronto!"

Many of the houses stood close together and Fest's threatened to spread the conflagration to adjoining structures. Hatfield posted a couple of watchers to make sure Tully did not again attack, and pails were hastily obtained, men, women and children jumping to the task. The Ranger assisted and so did townsfolk who were neutrals and had so far taken no part in the feud between Wier and the cowmen.

CHAPTER XI

Problems

QUICKLY they concentrated on the small fire started at Frolicher's and soon quenched it. Eva and Colette were there and hurried to greet Gaston Fest and Aje Pickett. The women had taken refuge at their neighbor's when the bandits had struck.

Fortunately Tully had not been long at work. As Hatfield had believed he must, Bandolier Ed had rested his men and picked up fresh mustangs, no doubt breakfasted before falling upon Castroville.

The citizens wet down nearby walls and nimble youths ran up ladders to douse smoking shingles. Inside of an hour's hard work they had everything out except the fire at Fest's. The rancher's place was ruined, the roof caved in and the debris feeding the flames. Some stood by with buckets of water to control the menace.

Hatfield rolled a cigarette and sat on a low fence, taking a breather. A small cyclone struck him, jumping on his back. It was Suzette, Fest's female mongrel. She welcomed him with the wildest extravagance. Only the fact there were many others to greet made her desert the Ranger at last.

Gaston Fest and several ranchers approached him. "This sickin' Tully on our women and kids is the last straw," said Fest. "Schorp's harborin' our enemies, and Wier's responsible for it all. We aim to accuse him. What do yuh think?"

Hatfield rose slowly, his face grim. He extracted the silver star from its secret pocket and fastened it to his shirt as he nodded.

"They savvy me, I reckon. We'll go see what Wier has to say. But we can't rush that Biergarten in broad daylight, we'd lose too many friends tryin' it. Mebbe Tully ain't there but I'll guarantee the bunch we met on the road is, so the Baron has plenty power."

They made ready and the Ranger rode first on the golden sorrel. Schorp's was at the north end, and strategically set off by itself. A block from their objective, old Marshal Kotzenhoff came riding from a side way, calling to them in a high-pitched, cracked voice and waving frantically to stop them.

"Now look here, Fest, don't start any trouble," he panted. "I aim to keep the peace."

"Where were yuh when Bandolier Ed Tully and his rustlers tried to burn down our homes?" demanded Fest angrily.

"I tried to stop 'em but I was outnum-

bered." The marshal's seamed eyes fell on Hatfield's Ranger star. "Yuh better take that emblem off, suh," he warned. "Yuh're no Ranger. I savvy all about yuh. They say yuh killed the owner and stole his badge."

"Yuh got yoreself mighty tangled up, Marshal," replied Hatfield softly. "I s'pose Wier and Schorp have lied to yuh and set yuh on the wrong track. Ride along if yuh like and see for yoreself."

Kotzenhoff joined the parade, grumbling and waggling his goatee as he shook his head. As they swung into the wide way facing Schorp's, a bullet sang over them and they pulled up.

"Schorp!" called the Ranger.

The door was closed but there were men with rifles in the windows on both floors. After a brief wait Otto Schorp's frightened face appeared.

"Go away, Fest," he yelled, his tone falsetto with fear. "Here you cannot come!"

"Send Wier out, we want to spiel with him," ordered Hatfield.

Wier flung open the door, a pistol in one hand, his cane in the other. He faced them, his jaw thrust out, nostrils flared as he sniffed. He could see the Ranger star. The fact the tall man was a state officer was no surprise to him.

"What do you want, Fest?" he demanded, his powerful voice easily reaching them. "Have you come to attack me on top of your other lawlessness?"

Fest's face had turned beet red with fury at sight of the arch-enemy, Dolf Wier. The Baron showed not the slightest embarrassment nor guilt. He seemed to consider himself master of the situation.

"Wier, yuh set those rustlers on us and ordered 'em to burn our homes," raged Fest, his Gallic temper getting the better of him. "We savvy yuh ordered Tully to steal our herd and then, when we snatched it back, destroyed our property."

"You lie, Fest," answered Wier coldly. "I have no such connection with Tully. You and your friends are no better than squatters, land thieves holdin' what is mine! You refuse to surrender what you've stolen. You fired on my agents when they were going about their duties for you have no right to graze your cattle on another's range."

AS THEY heard Wier's bold perversions of the truth, the ranchers were amazed by the Baron's effrontery. Fest at last found his voice, exploding and shaking his fist at Wier as he shrieked:

"Yuh'll pay for this, yuh outlaw!"

A faint smile touched Wier's drawn lips. "As for the law, it will uphold me," he declared. "We shall see."

"What did I tell yuh, Fest?" said Marshal Kotzenhoff nervously. "He's got all sorts of deeds and claims to the sections yuh say are yourn. First thing yuh savvy yuh'll find yuh're in the wrong."

"Go away!" snapped Fest, brushing the ineffectual old fellow off. "Yuh're a fool."

Baron Dolf Wier waited, looming in the open door, Schorp hovering behind him and peeping past his shoulder. Deadly carbines and shotguns covered the group in the plaza.

"What say we go cool off, Mr. Fest?" drawled the Ranger. "I figgered Wier had himself covered. We need more evidence against the cuss."

An ignominious withdrawal was all that remained. They could hardly charge the thick walls with Wier on the alert.

Fest's house was still burning, a few watchers making sure it did not spread. Hatfield dismounted, spoke with Fest and his group. All Castroville had turned out at the alarm and the citizens were aware of the enmity between the two factions. But as was usually the case, those not set upon were loath to take sides. They had property and families to think of, while the city marshal's stupidity and the fact that Otto Schorp was a local light and had cleverly spread his poisonous propaganda, prevented the public from backing Gaston Fest and his friends.

"Tully will probably be back after dark," said Hatfield. "We better stick together, or they'll pick yuh off one by one. Frolicher's might be the spot. He has a big barn and plenty of walled yard. Collect yore folks and we'll hole up there till I set things straight. We'll mount a regular guard, day and night."

Ragged and hungry for a substantial meal, Fest and his followers hastily assembled their loved ones, who brought along bedding and foodstuffs to camp at Fritz Frolicher's roomy home. Dupres, Briot, Legere, Mohler and the rest, with their sons and cowboys, stretched out after eat-

ing and slept, the Ranger among them.

When night fell over Castroville, the fire at Fest's had died off save for slowly rising smoke from the smouldering ruins. Lamps were lighted in the house, lanterns at the gates and the barn. Armed sentinels stood inside the low walls, watching for signs of the enemy. At the other end of town, Baron Wier held Schorp's.

Hardly had dark cloaked the settlement when Buck Robertson was passed through and the Ranger consulted with his youthful aide in the shadow of the stable.

"I saw Tully start work," reported Buck. "But there was nothin' I could do, Jim. I was hid up the slope in the woods and it was broad daylight. Yuh ordered me to keep out of sight."

"Yuh done right, Buck. They'd have shot yuh down or captured yuh if yuh'd horned in and yuh couldn't have done any good. Now see here. I need more evidence to squash that Wier sidewinder. I'm handin' yuh a dangerous assignment. In the mornin' yuh wander up to that *Biergarten* and see if Schorp will give yuh a job as stable boy. He must need help with all those extra folks on deck. Schorp's not too bright and he loves flattery. Tell him yore name's Emile, yuh're a good German, savvy, and yuh've heard what a great feller he is. Butter him up and mebbe yuh can work in there."

"And then?" Nothing pleased the youth more than such a perilous task.

"If yuh make it with Schorp, leave the rear wall gate unlocked. Watch for me tomorrer night, say one A.M. Make shore where Wier's room is, savvy? And keep yore ears and eyes peeled."

Later, the lamps were turned out and across Castroville the two armed factions bristled, tension taut over the ordinarily docile settlement. Alert sentries watched the approaches but if Bandolier Ed Tully entered town to consult with his evil master, no attack came that night. Gray dawn came, and the refreshed men breakfasted, talking together about the terrible scourge which had struck them.

In the streets, as the sun rose, people went about their various duties, children played, dogs and chickens roamed the open lots. Wier was waiting, no doubt planning further devastating attacks that might come at any moment.

The day finally passed, and night came.

An hour past midnight, Ranger Hatfield slipped along the back roads toward Schorp's *Biergarten*. He had heard nothing from Buck that evening and hoped his friend had managed to enter Schorp's. Soon he would know for sure.

The Ranger had carefully made up for this spying task. He had left his Stetson, leather chaps and heavy spurred boots behind and had smeared his face and hands with stove blacking from Mrs. Frolicher's kitchen range. A loaded Colt was thrust into his trousers band since he had also discarded the cartridge belts along with gear which might prove noisy or cumbersome. He wore black pants and shirt, oiled moccasins which were part of his war kit.

The Baron's wolfhounds would be around the *Biergarten* and perhaps ranging the spacious walled yard. They had proved a serious problem to him. On a short length of rope Hatfield led Suzette, Gaston Fest's sociable dog.

"It's up to yuh to charm those mutts, Suzette," he told her, as they cut through a side road. "Keep it quiet, now!" Suzette wagged her whole body and whined happily, straining on the leash.

Hatfield paused to check up, two hundred feet from Schorp's rear entrance, a carriage gate leading into the stableyard. The barn loomed a few yards past this, over the high wall, then came the *Biergarten* and next the main building, of two stories with a steep roof. The stable was dark but there were lights in the saloon and over the top of the barrier he could see that second-story windows at the southeast corner of the inn were open to the warm air, a lamp burning in the room.

HE STOOPED and held Suzette's muzzle so she could not bark because a horseman suddenly appeared, riding around the place. It was one of Wier's men, a sentry on his beat.

Sounds reached him, men's voices raised in a drinking song, now and then a sharp howl as a hound gave tongue. There were two guards riding circle in opposite directions. On the next round he watched them pass and swing the corners. When they were gone he ran lightly to the carriage gate.

It was unbolted. The iron latch clicked as he lifted it but this was lost in the gen-

eral noise. Suzette eagerly shoved past his leg, sniffing and whining, and then they were in the black shadow cast by the barn.

"Jim!" There was Buck Robertson, waiting for him.

Suzette was overcome with emotion. She jumped up and Buck knelt, his arms about her. "Keep her shut," warned Hatfield. "Are those cussed wolves of Wier's on the prowl?"

"Yeah. They're in the bar but they may come out any moment. I made friends with 'em, the Baron interduced us. I done like yuh said, and Schorp gave me a job tendin' horses and sweepin' out. I sleep in the stable."

The stalls were filled and along the north wall a picket line of mustangs could could be seen. A flat wagon, two buggies and other equipment stood in a back corner.

"Things are nasty, Jim," continued Buck earnestly. "Wier's boilin' hot over losin' that herd. He aims to kill Fest and his pards and pronto, either tomorrer or the next day, probably hittin' at dawn. That bunch yuh bumped into on the San Antonio trail are roadbuilders who work for him. They fetched blastin' powder and are makin' bombs to toss at Fest."

"Is Bandolier Ed here?"

"He's inside, so's Gasca. They're perfectin' their plans. The Baron says he won't have any more slips and will see to it this is final."

Hatfield touched Buck's arm and the youth muzzled Suzette with a hand. Hoofs clopped outside as the circling sentinels passed, exchanging a word together.

"How can I get into Wier's room? Is there a ladder handy?" asked the Ranger, when the mounted guards had gone on.

"I have one ready. It's lyin' along the inside of the wall close to the buildin'. Look." Buck led him to the stable corner and Hatfield could see the sweep of the garden, with shrubs and flower pots, benches and tables. But it was empty, for the desperadoes were crowded in the bar, many of them drunk. Tully's outlaws were heavy imbibers and not to be held down. "That's Wier's, he keeps it locked when he ain't in his room. But the winder's open."

Buck was a help, thought the Ranger, as he checked the long yard. One wall was shadowed, bushes growing near it would offer a route to the inn. The back door stood wide, faint light coming from up front. As he stared, the lithe, powerful forms of Wier's wolfhounds broke the yellow rectangle as they bounded into the garden.

"Step in the stable, pronto," warned Buck.

Hatfield slid through an open service door and partly shut it, leaving a crack through which he might peek. The quiet stampings, the breathings of horses came from the stalls and an animal in the picket line outside gave an alarmed neigh as the big dogs loped by.

CHAPTER XII

Discovery

PRUDENTLY the Ranger kept a hand on his Colt, for the wolfhounds could tear a man to pieces. They had caught a scent and twice had come for Hatfield. He watched, to make sure Buck was not attacked. The big dogs rushed in, snarling. Suzette whined and they came to a sliding stop, ears up.

"Blucher, Bismarck," said Buck urgently. "'All right, boys, all right!"

Suzette rolled over, kicking all four legs in the air, while Blucher and Bismarck sniffed at her. Suddenly she rose and snapped at them and they jumped back. Then she wagged her tail and the three began to play. All the ferocity had gone out of the wolfhounds who were charmed by Suzette. Buck held tight to the rope leash but was pulled along in the rush.

Suzette stopped near the rear corner where the wall turned. The dogs were sniffing and whining and Suzette began scratching at loose dirt. The wolfhounds joined her, and kicked back soil and gravel, while the Ranger, who had hoped the males would be captivated by Suzette's feminine wiles, slipped from the stable. He approached carefully but Blucher and Bismarck paid him not the slightest attention. All they could think of was Suzette.

"Don't let her get into the bar," whispered the Ranger. "Schorp will savvy

whose dog she is. I'll go see if I can get up to Wier's." But the insistent whining of Suzette, the frantic digging, made him pause. The three dogs were now at this. A heavy slab of stone, left over from paths and paved terraces throughout the Biergarten, interfered with the animals. "What are they after?" wondered the Ranger. On a hunch, he stooped and with a sharp tug, shifted the flagstone. Suzette and the wolfhounds immediately went to work under it. The earth was loose enough and they kept working. The Ranger squatted there, waiting.

"They've hit somethin'," said Buck.

On the back road the sentries passed again. Tully's drunken crew in the saloon whooped it up. At any moment, Wier or another foe might appear. In the faint light the Ranger could see a dark bulk uncovered by the dogs. He touched it with a testing hand, found it was cloth damp from the earth. It covered a stiffened body and he crouched there, by the animals, the wolfhounds unperturbed by his presence.

"Watch, Buck. I'm goin' to strike a match."

He cupped the flame in his palm. Its light disclosed a shallow grave the dogs had dug into and a man's corpse lay in it. The stone slab had been laid over the body, no doubt to prevent the hounds and other animals from disturbing it.

The match flickered out and Hatfield looked around, checking to make sure they were not being observed. Everything seemed normal. So close to the wall, they were hidden from the circling guards.

"Keep yore eye on the rear door," Hatfield whispered. He ventured another match. The dead man lay on his back as he had been crammed into the trench. Across the shirt pocket were neatly sewed stitches in red thread, the letters standing out against the grey cloth. "Jean Ulrich," read the Ranger.

He knew he had found Gaston Fest's missing friend.

Quickly he helped Buck cover up the corpse and they shifted the slab back into position. "I'll try Wier's now. Stick here, Buck."

He went silently along the wall, skirting the shrubbery. The short ladder was where Buck had said it would be. But up high on it he would be visible to the sentries and he waited, placing them by sense of hearing. When they were around front, he set the ladder against the ribbed wall and went up it.

He could look into the empty room where a lamp burned low on the round table. Pulling himself over the sill, he took stock of the belongings. Baron Dolf Wier's monogrammed traveling bags stood in a corner. Maps and papers were neatly stacked on the table. The Ranger tiptoed to the closed door, locked on the outside. From below came sounds of mirth, stamping of booted feet. Someone was playing an accordion and intoxicated rustlers were dancing.

INSIDE of a few minutes he had checked up on Wier's available records and was ready to leave. "I've learned somethin'," he mused.

Not wishing to show himself in the window, for he could not place the sentinels from inside, he turned the lamp wick down a bit farther so that it flickered out. Wier would ascribe it to a puff of breeze, perhaps, if he remembered having left it lighted.

He let himself out, moccasined feet feeling for the round ladder rungs. In a jiffy he was back on the grass, hurrying to rejoin Buck, who was having a time controlling the antics of the fascinated wolfhounds and Suzette.

"Found out plenty," said the Ranger. "Listen for me, Buck. I'll give our whistle when I want yuh to unlock the gate. Take care of yoreself and don't run any chances yuh don't have to, savvy?" He pressed the lad's hand, picked up Suzette and moved off.

He waited inside for the mounted outlaws to pass. They came on the regular round, and turned the corners. Hatfield pulled back the gate. But the wolfhounds were still for Suzette and sought to rush out with him. Buck fought to hold the powerful beasts in.

"Blucher, Bismarck!" he pleaded.

Hatfield fended them off with a foot and backed out, clutching the squirming Suzette. Buck managed to slam the gate and the bar rattled into place. But cut off from Suzette, Blucher and Bismarck set up a terrific protest. They howled and barked, jumping against the gate. The

Ranger, Suzette under one arm, started across the road. He began running as a sentry, hearing the commotion, swung back to see what went on.

"Hey, there, where yuh goin'?" shouted the rustler.

As Hatfield failed to stop, a bullet whirled within inches of the moving officer. He heard it slam into a house wall just ahead. The guard dug in his spurs, pursuing. Answering hails came from his companion while the gunfire alerted the whole crew at Schorp's. Toughs streamed forth to do battle.

Hatfield gripped Suzette with his left hand, pulling his Colt with his right. The outlaw who had spied the dark figure came tearing after him, gaining with every bound of his horse. The Ranger swung to rip a couple of bullets back, rattling his opponent. The gunslingers swerved but more were hurrying in for the kill.

Hatfield could hardly move with a mustang's speed but he could go where a horse could not. He vaulted a low picket fence, taking it in stride, and ran down a narrow path between two high-gabled homes, dark in the night.

"Come on, Suzette, yuh're on yore own," he warned, dropping the dog. He kept hold of the leash and she went along with him gladly enough, excited by the hubbub.

Behind him he could hear yells of many enemies. He crossed the next street and kept to the yards, heading for Frolicher's where his friends waited his return.

Aje Pickett, hearing howls and shots toward Schorp's raised his carbine and cocked it as he squatted behind the brick wall. He could command the approaches from the back street and his signals brought reserve fighters to man the defenses.

Pickett was on duty at the rear of Fritz Frolicher's, where the victims of Baron Dolf Wier were making their final stand. Out there somewhere was Ranger Jim Hatfield, who had done so much for them. Perhaps Hatfield was in danger, the target of those blasting guns.

"What's wrong, Aje?" demanded Gaston Fest, who had been sleeping in the nearby barn.

"Don't savvy yet, boss. Sounds like Hatfield may have bumped into a fuss."

"Take care, men," warned Fest. "The Ranger may be comin' through. Make shore yuh don't fire on our friend by mistake."

In a twinkling the surrounding barrier was manned by ranchers, their sons and loyal cowboys who had been dozing on their arms. They were aware of Wier's terrible menace, that the fatal, all-out attack might come at any instant, but were ready to die at the breaches.

PICKETT had already lost blood helping Fest and his Castroville associates. The giant cowboy had thrown in his lot with these fine people. He was deeply in love with Colette and convinced she returned his affection. Some day he hoped he could marry Fest's pretty, spirited young daughter. That was Pickett's ambition and he would go the limit now he had made up his mind. Besides his adoration for the girl, he had come to admire Fest and the others, to hate Bandolier Ed Tully and Dolf Wier.

Hatfield, the man from Austin, had so far managed to pull them out of the pit dug by Wier and his outlaw cronies. But Pickett, along with the others, had the feeling they were hanging on by a very slender thread, a thread which might snap any time and plung them all into the abyss. Wier's strength was growing rather than abating. The Baron's nature was as savage as a wild beast's and he had not the animal's excuse for he was possessed of a keen mind and knew exactly what he was doing.

As they listened, the ranchers heard a dog whining, approaching rapidly along the rear street. "That's Suzette," said Pickett. "She's with Hatfield." Then the yellow shape of Fest's dog bounded over the wall, as Pickett whistled to her. She had been freed and came as the Ranger's messenger to let them know he was near. Suzette bounded to Fest, to Pickett and the rest of the defenders, panting with the exertion of saying hello but finding it most convenient they were crouched so she could lick faces without jumping up.

Whistles and calls from the lane heralded the arrival of the Ranger. Soon Hatfield came through the gate, opened by Pickett. Fest grasped his hand.

"Glad yuh're back safe, Hatfield!" cried the rancher.

"Some of 'em are after me," panted Hatfield, out of breath from the run.

CHAPTER XIII

Outlaw's Hate

SHOD hoofs of moving horses clicked on stones. Guessing the intruder seen at Schorp's might be from Frolicher's the rustlers came toward the place. Vague shapes loomed in the darkness, in both the rear and front streets and when challenged, their blazing guns flashed in the night.

Pickett and his mates replied, their carbine fire driving off the foe. Yells followed, and volleys smashed in, but after a few ineffectual stabs, the riders pulled away, back toward the Biergarten.

"I'm dry as a desert rat," said Hatfield, sprawling on the grass.

Wine and cool well water were brought to him. Fest, Frolicher, Pickett and others gathered about him although sentries remained on watch during the conference. They were eager to hear what the tall officer had to say.

In the faint light cast by a lantern hung from the post by the barn door, they could see the rugged face of their friend, the Texas Ranger from Austin. It was streaked with blacking and he wore no hat, his raven-black locks held back by a bandanna. Gray-green eyes swept them with a fearless, steady gaze and every man there felt renewed hope and confidence.

"He's shore salty, a man to cross the desert with," thought the admiring Pickett. "I'm glad he's on our side!" He would not have traded Hatfield for a dozen Wiers.

When he had drunk and rolled a quirly to which Fest held a lighted match, Hatfield began to describe his adventure at Schorp's. They listened, fascinated, with bated breath as he told how Buck had unlocked the stable gate of Suzette's conquest of the wolfhounds.

"We have found Jean Ulrich, thanks to Suzette and the Baron's dogs. He was shot to death there at Schorp's and buried out back."

"I figgered so," growled Gaston Fest sadly. "His wife's here with us, yuh know, Ranger."

"Schorp don't act like he had the nerve to kill a brave hombre," said the Ranger. "He looks to Wier and is afeared of the Baron. Fawns all over the cuss. I believe Schorp will break if we put him in a tight spot. I aim to try it, anyways. Was Wier around here when Ulrich dropped out of sight?"

"Yes, he had come a day or two before," replied Fest.

"Then it's possible the Baron had a hand in it. By the way, has anybody looked up Wier? Is he a real baron?"

No one had. They had been too set upon and occupied for that. "Come to think of it, Ulrich had a book tellin' of all titles in Central Europe," said Fest. "I'll ask his wife about it, and see to it myself."

"Schorp toadies to Wier on account he's s'posed to be a nobleman. The German's that kind of squinch owl." Hatfield took another refreshing draught of liquid and then plunged into the problem. "I've found what Wier is after, drivin' yuh from yore range. He's gathered a tough bunch, enough to hit us here and take us over if they're determined about it. On foot those road laborers of his will make good enough fighters and they have explosives as well and savvy how to handle 'em. Tully can furnish plenty riders and his rustlers will kill when they have the upper hand. They'll come at us any moment, mebbe this comin' dawn, mebbe tomorrer."

Pickett squatted on his haunches, taking it all in. It was grave news. He tried to think of some countermove against Wier's power but nothing came to him. Fest and his friends were in the right. But Wier had the might and before they could collect the necessary strength to stand off the Baron, they would be wiped out.

The Castroville ranchers exchanged glances, listening to the calm voice as Hatfield analyzed the situation.

"Here's how I see it. We're sittin' ducks, waitin' for Wier's pleasure. We got to strike first and try to throw 'em off balance. If we're bold enough it may work."

"What yuh aim to do?" asked Fest curiously.

"Schorp's place is seethin' with Tully's men and Wier's bunch, bodyguards and

the road workers. If we could draw out some of 'em and stir it up right, I might be able to grab the Baron in the excitement. It would stall things. I could shore use Otto Schorp, too. He's vain and a bully, and he'll squawk when I pressure him."

PICKETT was eager to help. Hatfield asked, "Who will volunteer to act as bullet bait?"

"I will," cried Aje, raising a hand as large as a ham. "Let me try. Bandolier Tully hates my soul and if anything can draw him out the sight of me will do it."

"Yuh may be right, Aje," said the Ranger. "Yuh take the lead. Yuh ought to have half a dozen wiry riders with yuh and pick the best of the horses for the job."

The Frolicher boys and older youths were as quick to volunteer. They listened to instructions.

"Just as the dawn comes so's they can spot yuh, ride up to the front of Schorp's," ordered Hatfield. "Whoop it up and shoot everything yuh got at the winders and door. Keep movin' though, challengin' 'em to sashay out. If Tully comes for yuh, push north just out of range, and entertain 'em as long as yuh can. Meanwhile the party with me will rush Schorp's back gate, Buck will unlock it. We'll go in and do as much damage as possible, mebbe arrest Wier, and run home."

"But if we take the *Biergarten*, why not keep it?" asked Fest.

"I thought of that," answered Hatfield. "But it will be too hot to hold. Bandolier Ed would be on the loose. He could come here and wreck yore homes, scatter the women and kids, for we haven't enough men to guard the place properly with so many out."

Aje Pickett and his youthful aides chose their mustangs and saddled them, checked their carbines and Colts. Hatfield would take fifteen fighters on the raid while the rest must maintain a thin defense at Frolicher's.

It was not long until zero hour and they hurried to prepare for the desperate strike at Wier. It was three A.M. when Aje Pickett kissed Colette good-by and mounting his strong brown gelding, led his few cowboys from the rear gate. They had been furnished with the fastest horses since they must stay ahead of Tully's ravening band.

Pickett rode south a few blocks, then cut over to the Medina and lined up the stream. He wished to approach Schorp's from an unexpected direction and they pushed down a slanting road which brought them to the open field on which the Biergarten faced, coming from the northwest.

In a patch of woods on the far side, Pickett peered across at Schorp's. The killers who had dashed out after Hatfield had returned. Circling sentries rode slowly around the high walls, and lamps burned in there.

The stars and moon were visible but the darkest hour had passed. The new dawn was at hand and inexorably the streak in the eastern sky widened. A grayness came over the world and Pickett could make out details.

"Here we go, boys," he nodded. "Make a real fuss, now, and keep shootin'."

He led the charge, shrill Rebel yells in his throat as he picked up speed and galloped forward. He opened fire, sending slugs through the windows, the crashing glass tinkling as it smashed.

Dust whirled up from the beating hoofs of snorting cayuses driven to the walls. All of the attackers were shooting and howling.

"Tully, come out and make yore fight!" bellowed Pickett. He kept repeating his challenge, showing himself as he ripped up and down in front of the drinking place. Reaction was fast. Puffs of smoke spurted from windows and the mounted guards yelled warnings, spurting back around the corners as they pulled trigger.

Metal was shrieking about the lowered heads of the cowboys, all moving fast, zigzagging and turning after short dashes.

"Watch it, Aje!" shouted Kurt Frolicher. "Here they come!"

Pickett looked over his shoulder. From the north side, past the wall, appeared Bandolier Ed Tully, Gasca and bunch after bunch of riders, the rustler foes Aje had made when he had bucked the thieves and warned Gaston Fest. They were thirsting for his hide. Tully had a special grudge against the youthful cowboy giant.

HASTILY Pickett ripped his rein. His friends were pivoting their mounts

and beating for the northwest road out of Castroville. One look had been enough to tell Pickett that the bulk of Tully's rustlers were with their chief, coming for him.

Aje held the most dangerous point, the rear, considering it his right as leader of the party. He shot back now and again at Bandolier Ed as he maintained a narrow margin of safety. Only a chance hit could bring him down.

In the freshening morning light, he could see Tully's twisted face and the one-sided grin on the bandit's lips. Tully leaned eagerly forward in his saddle, a pistol clutched in one hand as he guided with his knees and rein. Savage, filled with hatred, Bandolier Ed was intent on catching Pickett.

They left the settlement behind them, the Medina on one hand as they tore northward. Rolling, grassy range opened out, and as the full dawn came Pickett sighted a bare expanse, one of the gray-black areas scattered over the land.

He looked back to gauge the gap between himself and Tully, who yelled and tried a long shot when he saw Pickett was watching. It was Bandolier Ed's nature to want Picket to know just who took him, if it happened. In front of Aje were the five youngsters, scampering for their lives on fast mustangs.

Pickett wondered how things might be going with Hatfield, who had undertaken to strike Schorp's. Aje knew he had managed to draw out most of Tully's gunhands. That would still leave a formidable force, the roadbuilders and Wier's bodyguard, for the Ranger to contend with, but it would be possible for the tall officer to win now.

Aje felt safe enough with the heaving chestnut under him. Then his mount gave a sudden leap. Pickett heard several exploding guns behind him but that had been going on all the way from Castroville. An instant later, however, he realized something was wrong. The saddle slid loose. A cinch had snapped.

He gripped with his knees but the blanket pad shifted with the leather hull. Pickett nearly fell off, the saddle jolting to one side. He kept his head, slowed the chestnut and coolly jumped down. The cinch had not come unfastened. Evidently a stray bullet must have ricocheted from a flat rock and clipped through it, slightly wounding the chestnut bronc. Pickett saw at a glance the bleeding hide slash, the fresh, uneven breaks in the webbing of the cinch. He used a double rig so the undamaged front one still held but he could not ride that way and had not the necessary time to mend the broken band. He hastily unbuckled the front cinch and pushed the saddle off, jumped on bareback.

Howls of triumph rose from Tully and his followers. Blasting volleys drove at Pickett and his handful of friends turned and came back shooting, trying to slow down the enemy.

"Go on, boys, ride!" roared Pickett, waving them off.

The delay had proved fatal. In the minute required to get rid of the hull, Bandolier Ed had pulled up within easy range. The chestnut mustang, starting away, shuddered and began to sink to the ground, hit in the vitals.

Pickett's boys made a valiant attempt to reach him ahead of the rustlers.

"Save yoreselves, yuh chumps!" yelled Pickett, unwilling they should sacrifice themselves for him.

He squatted by the dead horse, drawn Colt up. Slugs were kicking up dust spurts all around him and he heard a couple plug into the quivering creature. He flattened behind the bulk of the animal. Heavy volleys drove back the cowboys and then the world blacked out for Aje Pickett. One moment he was awake and in full possession of his senses, as he watched the vicious foes close in. The next the lights doused. He collapsed and lay still.

When Pickett came to, Gasca was throwing water in his face while Bando-
with a spur point.
lier Ed Tully stood over him, pricking him

"He's playin' possum," growled Tully. "I'll tickle the sidewinder awake!" He dug deeper and Pickett grunted and swore.

"What did I tell yuh!" said Bandolier Ed.

THEY surrounded Pickett, holding their horses. In the near distance Pickett's friends had pulled up, hoping for some chance to rescue him, if he were not dead. Pickett realized his Stetson was missing, that blood matted his hair. He had been neatly creased by a Colt bullet.

"Here we are, Tully," said Pickett. "What yuh aim to do?" He tried to sit up but Bandolier Ed kicked him in the face, cursing him, knocking him flat again.

"I wanted yuh to savvy who got yuh, Pickett," snarled Tully. "Yuh double-crossed me and no hombre can do that and stay alive. I'm goin' to kill yuh. Yuh got it comin', after what yuh done, yuh sneakin' traitor!" Bandolier Ed raised a Colt, hammer spur back under his thumb, and pointed it at Pickett's head.

But he was enjoying his victory and did not wish to hurry it. The crooked grin twisted his cheek.

"Here comes Wier," said one of the interested spectators among Tully's bunch.

Bandolier Ed glanced around. Dolf Wier, on a fast black, his wolfhounds running at either side of the horse, and trailed by a dozen members of his bodyguard, galloped toward the group on the grassy plain.

"Who is it?" demanded Wier, as he pulled up. "Oh, Pickett! Very good. I can use him. Hurry, Tully. They've attacked Otto's while you were gone. We must get back and retake it. Evidently this was a drawoff to run your men out of the way!"

The Baron's vicious jaw jutted and his face was crimson with rage.

"How in tarnation blazes did they take Schorp's with yuh and yore boys there?" gasped the astonished Tully, unable to believe what he heard.

"The rear gate was opened for them by this boy Emile, whom Schorp befriended," snapped Wier. He was very much upset and shaking with taut emotion. "There's no tellin' how much damage has been done," he went on. "That accursed Ranger led them. Him I shall deal with personally. The lad evidently was a spy sent by him to watch us and betray us."

"The little cuss!" growled Bandolier Ed. "He had me fooled with his mealy-mouthed talk. Did yuh plug him?"

"Not yet. He didn't know I saw him from my window," replied Wier. "When he came sneakin' back, to fool me further, I slashed him to the floor and carried him out the front way. The Ranger was in the garden, and they were charging the house when I left."

A pair of riders who had lagged behind Wier came up. With horror Aje Pickett stared at the limp form of Buck Robertson slung in front of a horseman, one of the Baron's loyal personal retainers. Across Buck's cheek, pale under the tan, was a long, reddish-blue weal disappearing in the youth's tousled hair.

CHAPTER XIV

Raiders

EVERYTHING had seemed to go swimmingly for the Ranger and his friends. Aje Pickett's drawoff had worked well, and the concealed fighters with Hatfield had watched as Bandolier Ed Tully's tough rustlers swept from Schorp's and spurred in full cry on the trail of the cowboys.

Not only that but the ruckus up front and the chase had drawn all the remaining defenders, among them the road workers and Wier's bodyguards, to the front of the *Biergarten*. Crouched in the first rays of the dawn, behind a deserted shed fifty yards away from Schorp's, the Ranger had given his whistle signal to Buck Robertson, waited to allow Buck time to act.

Stealing toward the back gates, they found the bolt undone and Hatfield quickly led his men inside. The garden was deserted, everybody inside the spacious structure or in the road beyond.

Buck was not in sight but this was not surprising for no doubt he would have hurried back, after unlocking the gates, so he could watch Wier. Many of the mustangs were gone from the yard, ridden off by Tully's outlaws as they tore after Aje Pickett.

Colt in hand, the tall Ranger ran to the kitchen entry, his friends following closely. On Hatfield's shirt glinted the silver star on silver circle, emblem of state authority. He had washed up at Frolicher's, strapped on his cartridge belts, pulled on his boots, and his Stetson strap was taut under his rugged chin.

The grim attackers silently made for the main building, hoping to enter before they were spied by those remaining at Schorp's. Several jumps in the van, Hatfield passed through the open door into a corridor. An empty dining room was at the left and a wider gap led right into the kitchens. Two

middleaged women and a Mexican youth were hard at work around the stoves and tables, cooking breakfast. Otto Schorp stood leaning against the wall, giving orders in a peremptory, overbearing voice. With his family and domestic help, Schorp was a petty tyrant.

"Schorp!" said Hatfield sharply.

The porcine proprietor nearly jumped out of his carpet slippers. He wore gray trousers and a white shirt, with a leather apron tied about his stout paunch. Steely hair bristled on his Prussian skull, his brown mustache twitched as he recognized the tall intruder.

"Ranger!" he squeaked, freezing in his tracks.

"Keep shut, Schorp," warned the officer, the Colt in command of the situation. One of the women, Schorp's cowed wife, gave a short scream and wrung her hands.

"Don't shoot!" whined Schorp.

"Not if yuh behave. Where's Baron Wier?"

"I don't know. Upstairs, in the saloon, I think."

You could see the waves of abject fear crossing the German's watery eyes. Hatfield's activities and the Ranger's power had impressed Schorp, who was not a fighting man.

Gunfire banged from the bar, up the corridor. Gaston Fest gave an exclamation, jumping into the kitchen. He shot back along the long hall, replying to the attack. Bullets were shrieking through the house and warning shouts came from the saloon.

Then a heavy door banged.

"Wier's up there," warned Fest. "One of his men slammed the connectin' door, Ranger."

Hatfield took a step forward, Schorp quailing before his might. His steel fingers closed like a vise on the proprietor's fat biceps.

"Where does Wier keep the explosives, Schorp? I want 'em."

Schorp gulped. He was shivering with fright. "I can't tell," he quavered.

Hatfield shoved his Colt muzzle into the taut flesh behind Schorp's bulging ribs. It was enough.

"I'll show you! I'll show you!"

THERE was a back stairs and Schorp led them up it. But Wier had thought of it and as they showed in the hall, seeking to descend into the bar, slugs drove them off. The baron had enough help to hold the front of the building, some of his bodyguard, and the thirty roadbuilders commanded by the wideset fellow.

Hatfield wondered about Buck. The youth might be in the bar with Wier and his contingent. But he kept his hold on Otto Schorp, trailing into a large room filled with gear. Blanket beds were spread on the floor to supplement the half-dozen bunks along the wall. Evidently the workers recently arrived to reinforce Wier slept here.

"There," said Schorp, pointing at a small wooden chest.

Hatfield slid over and lifted the lid. The box held a number of canisters with fuses attached, some long, others short for lighting and tossing. Extra fuse, caps and materials were stowed in the chest as well.

Murmuring voices, now and then the explosion of a gun, disturbed the peace. Heavy feet shook the building. Etienne Dupres sang out from a front chamber into which he had gone.

"Ranger! There goes Wier, ridin' away. He has some of his guard with him."

"Gone after Tully, I s'pose," said Hatfield to Gaston Fest. "Have a couple of the boys tote this chest to the barn."

Dupres came into the hall as the Ranger, Schorp in his charge, emerged. "One of 'em had a man slung across in front of him, Ranger," he reported. "I couldn't see who it was."

"Mebbe a wounded hombre," suggested Gaston Fest.

The upstairs rooms were empty, the enemy gathered in the saloon, with plenty of protection behind the heavy bar. They commanded those stairs, and the front approaches.

"We've gone about as far as we're goin', gents," drawled Hatfield. "This place is too hot for us to hold."

When Bandolier Ed Tully and the main band came raving back under Wier's urgings, the Castroville attackers would be trapped. As soon as armed rustlers surrounded the *Biergarten* there would be no escape in the morning light.

"Shall we burn this place?" asked Legere.

"I thought of it," answered the Ranger. "But it's better to savvy right where they

are than have 'em collect somewheres else. I got an idea, besides. Come on."

He was disappointed at having missed Dolf Wier, whom he had hoped to capture in the raid. Yet he had Schorp, the Baron's jackal, and had confiscated at least part of the explosives. "This will needle Wier," he thought, as he forced the complaining saloon owner down the rear steps and outside to the garden.

"What to me do you do?" demanded Schorp as he waddled ahead of his captor.

"Yuh'll find out soon enough, Schorp. Obey orders and I won't hurt yuh."

"Baron Wier, punished he will see you are," warned Schorp, who was most impolite to his verbs when under stress.

"Yuh got a lot to learn about yore master," drawled Hatfield.

His friends hurried after him, watching back so those in the bar would not open fire from the rear windows. They were almost at the stable before a yell and a pistol shot told the enemy had learned they had left the house. Bullets began whizzing down the length of the garden and they jumped behind the barn.

"Hold 'em down," ordered the Ranger.

Gaston Fest took over, directing his friends as they crouched at the corner to blast the foe. Hatfield led Schorp to one side, pointing at the stone slab marking Ulrich's grave.

"We savvy what's under there! Yuh killed him and buried him in the garden that dark night."

"No!" Schorp melted in sickly terror, knees sagging, whiteness coming into his florid cheeks.

Hatfield signaled Legere. "Take him to Frolicher's, Legere. Shoot him dead if he tries to run."

Legere grinned as he shoved Schorp out to the horses, which had been brought up close to the Biergarten. The Ranger, aided by the powerful Hans Mohler, hurried to the chest which had been brought here at his command. He spent a quarter hour at work outside the rear wall.

Watchers set gave warning. "Time to ride, boys," shouted Hatfield.

He leaped to the golden sorrel's saddle, cut to the turn. He could see along the high side wall, see the open spaces to the west and north of Schorp's. Wier, with Bandolier Ed and the rustlers, came tearing toward the saloon, hot for revenge.

CHAPTER XV

Missing

MOVING at top speed, they beat the outlaws to Frolicher's, entering the yard and jumping from their saddles. They ran to man walls and loopholes in the house and barn. Guns began roaring but the sun was up and the defenders could pick off charging riders.

Tully and Wier approached, urging their fighters before them. But the hot reception soon drove them away. They contented themselves with futile volleys and gestured or shouted threats.

Hatfield felt content enough at the outcome of the raid. Legere had taken the prisoner into a room off the kitchen and the big Ranger slouched in, looming over his prey. Since they had not harmed him, Otto Schorp had regained some of his nerve. He began sputtering defiance, promising reprisals.

"Baron Wier, he you will fix!" he snarled.

As Hatfield knew, Schorp counted heavily on the powerful, aggressive Wier. The German offered his master a slavish feudal loyalty, admiring Wier's ruthless strength. The autocratic baron had hypnotized Schorp and owned a deep psychological hold over him. The Ranger realized that before Schorp would yield to the law, this bond must somehow be broken.

To comfort himself and now believing the reason they had not harmed him was due to fear of Wier, Schorp mouthed wilder and wilder threats, sneering at Gaston Fest, Legere and others gathering about him. His voice grew harsh, his glaring eyes bulged from his clipped skull.

"*Schwein!*" he cried. "Miserable, low bandits! Baron Wier, a noble he is, you are nothing! Soon will he come, save me!" Schorp snapped his fingers.

"Dry up, Schorp," ordered Hatfield. "Yuh'll stretch hemp for killin' Jean Ulrich."

The saloonkeeper gulped. He had seen and felt this tall, cold-eyed officer's fighting ability. "Never!" said Schorp.

Hatfield stepped closer. Schorp quailed and held himself tense. "Wier is no baron,

Schorp. He's lied to yuh as he has to everyone else. He's a faker. He took yuh in and yuh've been workin' for a common highway robber."

Schorp gave a high-pitched laugh. Wier's title spelled everything to the vain *Biergarten* owner. He had boasted with inordinate pride of Wier's high birth and blue blood, basking in the reflected glory of the nobleman. Such a matter meant nothing to Hatfield or any other Texan but Schorp had held to the old country beliefs.

"Fairy tales you tell," Schorp replied loftily.

"Fetch that book, will yuh, Fest? The one yuh said Ulrich's wife had, listin' all those titles?" The Ranger rolled a cigarette and lighted it, letting Schorp stew in his juice.

Fest carried in a large tome with gilded pages, a volume brought from Europe when the settlers had come to Texas.

"See for yoreself," said the Ranger, dropping it in Schorp's lap. "No record of any Baron Wier. Those Spanish grants are forgeries. Yore boss fooled yuh. He's just as long as a snake and drags the ground when he walks!"

"Yuh turned against yore old friends here, Otto," said Fest. "Turned against us for a low bandit!"

Schorp's eyes popped. For the first time he seemed really shaken to the core. He sucked in his breath sharply as he began eagerly turning the pages of the peerage record.

"He must be here, must be," he muttered, licking his lips.

After a fruitless search he shut the book. "Ah, I remember! That night, when Ulrich died!" He wilted, and put down his head but they all saw the fat tears running down his apple-red cheeks. "Blind I was! Ulrich said the book he had, so Wier flew into a fury and shot!" He was talking more to himself than to them.

Schorp had cracked. Suddenly he had seen light, that Wier had taken him in, that the man for whom he had sacrificed his reputation and good name in Castroville was not a highborn peer but a common impostor. He began speaking, haltingly at first, then fully confessing. Wier had tried out his claims on Ulrich, but Ulrich had known the man was a liar, his title false. So Wier had killed Ulrich to put him out of the way, prevent him from wrecking the game.

"Yuh'll make a dangerous witness against Wier," said the Ranger. "Yuh'll need to be pertected. He'll kill yuh if he can."

A LULL had fallen over Castroville. The sun was rising. People not involved in the struggle were appearing as the gunfire checked and the armed riders quit the roads.

A call came from a sentry watching for the possible return of Wier. The Ranger had been engrossed in questioning Otto Schorp. He strolled out to see what was going on. Five young men had come into the yard, their horses and clothing matted with sweat and dust, worn to a frazzle.

"Nice work, boys," complimented the Ranger. "Yuh led off Tully and his rustlers so we could do our job at Schorp's. Where's Pickett?"

Kurt Frolicher, who was one of the picked fighters gone with Pickett, faced the officer. Frolicher's long face was grim. "Tully caught Aje, Ranger. Mebbe he's dead by this time. They grabbed yore young pard, too."

Hatfield jumped, the cold sweat starting out on him. "Buck?"

"Shore as it's hot below." Frolicher described how Pickett's saddle girth had snapped and the huge cowboy been captured.

Hatfield glanced around, teeth set. Colette Fest had come out and stood listening as Kurt told of the tragedy. She held herself tensely, her fists clenched. She bit her lip but then turned and hurried back into the house, to keep from breaking down before the men.

It was bad news for them all. The raid on Schorp's, which had seemed such a success, had cost a terrible price.

The Ranger pressed for details. He learned that Wier and Tully had hurried back to Castroville, that the Baron's bodyguard had held Pickett and Buck. Kurt Frolicher had taken command with Aje gone, and they had hung around, hoping to rescue their friends. The heavily armed outlaws had trussed Pickett and Buck, carried them off into the wooded hills. Some had turned savagely on the cowboys and gunned them off, keeping them busy, so that the Castroville men had lost sight

of the captives. Their mustangs done in by hard riding, the five had started home but had been forced to wait until Tully and Wier had retired to the biergarten and cleared the streets.

Hatfield took stock, thinking it over. "They may not be dead yet," he decided. He was aware of Tully's deep hatred for Aje Pickett. In the rustlers' clutches, Aje would have little chance. But from Kurt's story, he believed that Wier held the two prisoners. "He's smart enough to use 'em for hostages. Mebbe he'll run 'em in to Schorp's after dark."

Anita was on his mind, too, Buck's pretty sister. How could he face the young woman and tell her that the youth was dead? The full, cold fury of the Ranger's fighting strength welled in him. He would crush Wier or he would never ride back to Austin.

"Ranger, here comes Wier," announced a guard at the front wall commanding the street.

There was no firing. Hatfield, Fest and others hurried to the point. A rider carrying a white flag on a stick and waving it frantically so they would not shoot him, preceded Dolf Wier, who was surrounded by armed men.

"Wave a towel or somethin' back at the cuss," ordered Hatfield. "Let's see what he's got to say."

A white towel was shaken out and Wier pulled up within hailing distance, sitting his black horse, waiting.

Hatfield stood at full height by the gate, staring across the interval at Wier, who haughtily surveyed him. "You," called the Baron, pointing an imperious finger. "I want Otto Schorp. You're torturin' him, forcing him to lie about me. I'll trade Pickett for him."

"He's worryin'," thought the Ranger. Schorp knew too much. His story could hang Wier or make it necessary for the Baron to live on the dodge, unable ever to operate again. Wier must have realized this, and ten to one he would destroy Schorp once he had him back for he could never breathe with confidence with such a witness to his perfidy.

"Nothin' doin', Wier," replied Hatfield firmly.

"I'll throw in that boy. He's a friend of yours. He opened the back gate for you."

It was a tempting offer. At the price of the miserable Schorp's hide, Buck and Aje Pickett could be saved. Yet bowing before such intimidation was not on the Ranger's code any more than handing over defenseless prisoners in such a situation.

"Where yuh got 'em?" countered Hatfield.

"You'll find that out when you deliver Schorp." Wier's voice was thick.

The Ranger had a feeling the Baron was holding back something. Certainly Wier was craning his neck as he looked over the dispositions at Frolicher's. Probably Wier was plotting a full-scale attack that night.

CHAPTER XVI

The Jump

JIM Hatfield stared at the cruel, domineering foe who had brought such black terror over the Medina range. An offer from Wier could only be to the Baron's advantage. Wier wished to be certain of Otto Schorp. Maybe he hoped to work Schorp and Hatfield into the open, during an exchange, so that drygulchers could kill them.

The Ranger was convinced that Wier was planning to launch a full-scale, decisive battle after dark, when his fighting contingents could approach Frolicher's without running such risks from the defensive marksmen inside the walls. At that time he could hope to scoop up Schorp along with others, provided Schorp was there. But Wier must fear they would spirit the saloonkeeper off to a hidden prison and thus prevent the Baron from rescuing the witness.

The silver star shone on Hatfield's shirt. Outwardly he was unruffled but inside he was consumed by his anger. Such men as Dolf Wier considered only themselves and their desires. People who stood in their way must be liquidated, at any cost. A police officer of the Ranger's experience was aware of how outlaws justified themselves and excused the means they used to gain their ends.

"No," declared Hatfield. "No, Wier. I won't deal with yuh. I'm goin' to arrest

yuh for the killin' of Jean Ulrich, and for other matters. If yuh harm Aje Pickett and that boy, so much the worse for yuh when I take yuh. For take yuh I will. I guarantee it in the name of the Texas Rangers."

The even, cool way he spoke shook Wier, who was fuming. He felt the tall man's unflinching strength. "You've made me too much trouble," shouted the Baron. "I've wired charges against you to Austin, where I have great influence. I can prove you accepted bribes from Gaston Fest and others in Castroville to side with them in refusin' me my legal rights. You've shot up my men and destroyed my property!"

Hatfield shrugged. In such cases the survivor's story would prove the stronger. If Gaston Fest, the Ranger and a few key fighters perished in the struggle, then Dolf Wier could triumph, ride roughshod over the others.

Wier watched to see if his threat had any effect. As the Ranger stood firm, the Baron ripped his rein, turning his black and trotting away toward the *Biergarten*, trailed by his armed guards.

Frolicher's was quiet, a pall of gloom fallen over them at the loss of Pickett and Buck. The day promised to be very hot as the hazy air heated with the rising, brassy sun. The homely, familiar noises of Castroville, looking like a prim, old country village in Alsace-Lorraine, came to the people. Inhabitants were starting to work, children playing about the shaded yards and along the streets. A hen announced the exciting arrival of a new egg in this world, a dog chased a cat up a tree across the plaza and barked furiously, Suzette rushing out to join in the sport.

A meal and rest were in the cards. Madame Eva and other women began to prepare a hearty breakfast for the tired warriors. The tempting odor of cooking coffee mingled with the tingling scent of frying bacon and warming biscuits. There were many mouths to be fed, children eager for food.

Stores along the line were opening. Hatfield despatched two men to watch Schorp's. When the others had eaten, he sent relief observers, riding up there himself for a peek. The *Biergarten* stood quiet although it seethed inside with all Bandolier Ed Tully's rustlers plus a number of Wier's adherents, the road workers and those of his bodyguard who were in town. The doors and gates were closed and sentries were on duty but no shots were fired.

"He'll wait till dark," decided the Ranger.

He returned to Frolicher's. Most of his friends, save for a skeleton guard, were snoring, resting from their labors. Sleep claimed men, even in the midst of the worst struggle. Hatfield knew it was a good thing for they would need all their strength in the coming battle. He spread his blanket in the shade of the barn and lay down, gathering his powers for the test.

THE worst of the noonday heat had passed when the tall officer roused and sat up. He washed at the pump in the kitchen yard and rolled a smoke. In the kitchen, where Eva Fest called him, he enjoyed coffee, cold beef and buttered biscuits spread thick with wild berry jam. When Mrs. Fest had fed the big man, for whom she held great respect and liking, she set about cleaning oil lamps and filling them with fresh coal oil. She polished the glass chimneys until they shone like diamonds, trimmed the wicks and made sure they would easily turn.

"Ach," she exclaimed. "Always I run out of oil at the last lamp to be done!" She picked up the spouted can she had been using and started outside.

"Wait, let me do it for yuh, Madame Eva," begged the Ranger. He took the little gallon can and went to the shed. From a large drum he filled the smaller receptacle and carried it back to her.

"You are a fine gentleman, Mr. Ranger," she said. "We would have all been finished here if you had not come. Wier is a terrible man."

"How's Miss Colette?"

She shrugged. "Poor thing. You know she is in love with the big fellow, Aje. She is mourning for him, in her room. Too bad." Her eyes were clear and unafraid as she looked up into Hatfield's rugged face. "What is going to happen, sir? Will you stop Wier? You must."

"I'll stop him or savvy the reason why, ma'am," he answered quietly. "Now I'm goin' to work."

He admired such women as Eva Fest. They worked from dawn till bedtime, serving their loved ones. There was al-

ways a great deal of work around a home and it was unending. But Madame Eva was cheerful, ever ready to lend a hand to those in trouble. She sparked the Fest household.

Suzette wandered in, came to beg scraps from the Ranger's plate. She wagged her tail. It was very hot. She threw herself down on her side, and panted, lying under the table. Hatfield buckled on his heavy cartridge belts, loosened the big revolvers in the oiled holsters.

From experience, from a natural bent for such work, he knew that the time for action had come. He had so far managed to jolt Wier off balance and delay the baron's desperate, final attack. But now he was certain that only hours remained.

It was not his habit to lie low and permit the enemy the choice of battle. Surprise was the vital element, especially when a general was outnumbered. That was the way Sam Houston had done it at San Jacinto, a few hundred Texans falling upon Santa Ana's hordes at the unexpected moment.

He collected Gaston Fest, Fritz Frolicher and other rancher chiefs, and told them what he had planned, since awaking and putting his refreshed mind to work. A haze hung over the Medina Valley, induced by the extreme heat. Dust risen into the air stayed there or settled very slowly for there was no breeze. The sun was starting down in the western sky, beating over the vast reaches of the Big Thicket and the cattle range.

"Yuh've done a lot for us, Ranger," said Fest, shaking his head, when they had heard the officer's concise plan. "We can't let yuh drive that wagon. I'll handle the reins. There's too much chance of losin' yuh and that would be the worst thing could happen to us."

"No, I'm It," insisted Hatfield. "I aim to establish law and order in these parts. Yuh command yore pards and don't allow any slips. When yuh hear me whistlin', make shore Goldy is turned loose. I'll need him in the rumpus."

He gave each man careful instructions. Guns were cleaned and loaded, Colts, carbines and shotguns on which their lives depended. Horses were rubbed down, saddles checked.

In a rear shed at Frolicher's stood an old hay wagon with slat sides. In the loft was plenty of hay and the wagon was packed with the dry grasses. Assisted by the powerful Frolicher boys, Hatfield trundled over the drum of kerosene and hoisted it to the wagon, hiding it in the hay. He borrowed a small sledge and a sharp chisel and placed it on top of the drum. A long, worn duster, a straw hat with a wide brim, completed the equipment he wanted here.

NOT a peep had been heard from the ancient city marshal since the episode at Schorp's when Kotzenhoff had chided Fest and the Ranger for breaking the law. In fact, nobody had even seen the marshal. Either he was hiding in his home or had decided to go on a convenient hunting trip until the war was over and one side or the other was in control.

"I'd rather wait till dark but I don't dare," said the Ranger to Fest, as they finished their preparations. "I figger Wier will push off as soon as night falls. We must catch 'em before they're on balance. Just before sundown they'll eat and those rustlers will tank up for the killin' work they expect to do. They may have other bombs we failed to locate when we raided there. Wier's shore of us. He believes we're sittin' ducks and won't dare move from this spot, since we're so outnumbered."

The minutes dragged interminably as the long, hot day drew to a close. The sun was reddening over the heights westward of the Medina valley, slanting against the high gables of the old houses.

Hatfield shook hands with Gaston Fest. "Here we go," he said. "Keep to schedule, now. Good luck."

The Ranger entered the shaded shed. He wrapped his long body in the linen duster. Willing hands hitched two horses, broken to harness, to the hay wagon. The officer picked up chisel and hammer and made holes in the top half of the upright drum. Oil began seeping out into the dry hay.

Hatfield tied the straw hat low on his head, turning up the coat collar. He slumped on the open seat, chin on breast.

"How do I look?" he asked Fest. "Can yuh see my face from the side?"

"No," cried Fest. "Luck, Ranger."

The gates were held open and Hatfield drove into the lane and turned south away

from the *Biergarten*. The sun was dropping, enlarging and ruby in hue. He rattled along, hunched over the reins, and swung around the town, heading over for the river road. Along this he guided his team, hidden by the tall structures of Castroville.

Citizens were on the way home, and the appetizing odors of the evening meals, about ready to be served, hung in the warm air. A faint puff of wind, heralding the usual night breeze born as the atmosphere began cooling with the desertion of the sun, stirred the dust.

Buck was no longer at Schorp's to unlock the gates. To charge them in the daylight would be suicide. The Ranger knew that and had evolved this perilous method of approaching. Secretly he was worried, worried about Buck and Pickett. He did not know whether they were at the *Biergarten* or not. From the cowboys' report, he believed they had not yet been brought in from the mountains. Nor had he seen Wier's wolfhounds that day.

He was gambling now, staking his brains and what strength he could muster in the settlement, against Wier's might. A slip would be fatal.

Past the line, he turned in and allowed the horses to walk at a slow pace. He stayed doubled over on the plank seat, the picture of a weary, plodding worker coming in from the fields with a load of hay for domestic animals. But under the linen duster were the heavy Colts, and the alert officer.

Wier had sentries as usual around Schorp's. They saw the approaching wagon, watched it swing down the line. But they were not bothering people who weren't involved in the fracas. He kept his face turned, so they saw only the collar, the down-curved brim of the straw hat. And what could one man do against so many?

Fifty yards above Schorp's, he slapped the brown horses with the reins. They picked up the pace, and in a few jumps the expert driver had them moving at a gallop. It looked like a runaway. Several pairs of eyes in Schorp's front windows observed the scene with curiosity.

Close upon the *Biergarten*, Hatfield pulled hard on his left rein, swerving the horses straight to the walls. Not until they saw him upon them did the guards yell out a warning, and raise their guns.

The wagon slewed around, crashing hard, the Ranger jumping for it. A slug missed him and then he was behind the overturned wreckage, the oil-soaked hay dumped against the front door. Crouched down as they tried for him, protected by the bulk of the vehicle, he tossed lighted matches into the pile of hay.

They took hold, and within seconds the hay was a flaming, crackling mass of fire. The overturned drum kept feeding the oil to it and burning rivulets ran along the beaten ground before the building. Smoke and dust whirled up. Throwing off the hat and duster, Hatfield drew his Colts and ran for it, shooting back at the few who were already in position. Shouts of alarm rang from the saloon. They were all running to the front to face the threat.

In the drifting smoke, the Ranger made the turn, hugging close to the garden wall, whistling shrilly, signaling Gaston Fest.

CHAPTER XVII

Battle

DESPITE the risk of death, the Ranger had accomplished the first phase of his operations. He had engaged the attention of the forces at Schorp's. They kept trying for him as he rushed off, and he hoped they would believe the main attack was to be through the front entries.

The golden gelding galloped from the rear road. Hatfield's handsome mount whinnied. In a jiffy the officer bounded to his seat and zigzagged away. A slug clipped one of the flapping saddlebags but that was as close as they came in the few exciting instants that he was in easy range. Rifle fire crackled in front, a few sharpshooters hidden at safe points shooting at the bar, to hold Wier's attention.

From the back garden came a ground-shaking explosion, then a second one. Gaston Fest and his fighters had dashed in as soon as Hatfield had fired the oil-reeking hay to attract the enemy. Hidden fuses which the Ranger had taken care to plant, before he had left Schorp's during the raid, had been touched off.

Dust, smoke and rocks columned into

the air. The sorrel slewed around the wall's right angle. Fest and the others surged to their tall friend, shrill Rebel yells sounding, guns loaded and raised.

The wall had been breached, blown by the charges. Sentinels at the rear had been stunned, while most of Wier's gunslingers had dashed to the saloon at the alarm.

"Come on, boys," shouted Hatfield.

Shooting went on in the plaza. Hatfield jumped off Goldy and ran over a pile of rubble. Bits of brick and larger chunks rained on them as they swarmed through the breach into the open garden. Picketed mustangs, whinnying and milling madly about, driven crazy by excitement at the blasts, were pulling their stakes and running away.

"Drive 'em out," ordered the Ranger. Horse shapes flashed past, the enemy mounts leaving by the gates the attackers had opened or stumbling through the gaps.

Several of Bandolier Ed's men pushed from the back door of the inn. The Ranger was halfway up the garden and Tully showed, bellowing orders.

"Form a bucket line to the well! Hustle!" They ran out into the arms of the grim, determined cowmen, led by the tall Texas Ranger.

Tully swung, facing Hatfield and recognizing the officer. Tully's Stetson was off and his uncombed red locks stood out in all directions. Bandoliers crossed his bony shoulders. His usually florid complexion was a brick-red in the flurry and the scar held his right cheek back in a set grin.

"Reach, Tully!" ordered Hatfield, giving the usual Ranger warning.

But Bandolier Ed was a fast man with a Colt, a fine shot. He would not submit to arrest. His freckled hand sped to make his draw. Hatfield's high heels dug into the earth for a stance, the heavy revolver aiming, hammer spur back under his thumb joint. Tully's pistol muzzle was rising, the picture blurring, so fast was the rustler chief.

The two fired. Fest and his friends were opening up on the first men who had started for the well to combat the blaze. They recoiled, crowding back inside the building. The Ranger felt something flick his leg but it was only a chunk of grit thrown up by Bandolier Ed's bullet ploughing into the ground by his foot.

Tully was going down, his gun arm dropping as he clutched his throat with his left hand. His head had flexed back, lolled on his shoulders. Then he crumpled.

"Come on, come on!" urged Hatfield. "We must get in there before they're set!"

A foe's Colt snarled from the open kitchen entry, the bullet slashing a Castroville man in the arm. Blasts of lead drove them off and as yet Wier's main bunch was in the bar or starting through the corridor.

THEY reached the house wall and Hatfield, clearing the way with blazing guns, jumped into the hall. Men were jammed in the narrow aisle. "They killed Tully, they killed Tully!" someone kept screaming, panic in his voice. Rustlers and roadbuilders mingled together in surging fear.

A close bullet whirled past Hatfield's head as he opened up. Fest, Briot, the Frolicher boys and others pressed in to join him and their combined fire cleared the hall. The door into the bar was slammed, and the ranchers held the back of the building. In the kitchen Mrs. Schorp and her cooks cowered in fright at the intruders. "Stay out of the way, ma'am, and yuh won't be hurt," assured the Ranger.

He called Gaston Fest. "I'm goin' up and hold 'em. Mebbe I can fight down into the bar but we don't aim to lose any more of the boys than we have to. Make shore they don't slip past yuh, savvy?"

"Right, Ranger!"

Hatfield indicated several men to go with him and they ran up the back stairs. As he swung into the second-floor corridor, Gasca, Bandolier Ed's Mexican partner, showed as he hurried up from the bar. Down the long hall the two faced one another. Then, with a shriek of combined hate and dread, Gasca fell backward, shooting as he moved. He missed and the Ranger lead slashed at his disappearing legs. A heavy, rolling sound came as Gasca fell down the steps.

The officer rushed up there. "Here he come!" he heard Gasca screaming. "The Rangaire!"

Hatfield could not make the turn for they filled the air there with metal. He paused, shoving reloads into his hot Colts.

He could hear the excited chattering and swearing of the rustlers and Wier's

Austin bunch, the crackling of carbines and rifles from the plaza as the holders set by his orders sought to prevent the killers from escaping by the side and front windows. And a steady, menacing roar told that the fire he had set had taken hold and was eating into the front wall of Schorp's. He had the main body of Wier's army trapped in the saloon.

Sweat streamed down his dust-streaked face. Flecks of blood showed where flying splinters and grit had cut him. His nostrils flared, the gray-green eyes cold as an Arctic sea, the Ranger held the line.

Smoke was draughting up the stairway well. It caught at the throats of the Castroville men and they coughed. Below, in the bar, it must be rapidly growing untenable but it meant a bullet for a man to jump out one of the windows not yet engulfed in flames.

Hatfield crouched down, the smoke and heat rising through the opening from the bar. Booted feet beat the flooring and the cursing of the enemy grew shriller, less anger than hysteria. Finally a panicky voice yelled, "Ranger!"

"What yuh want?" replied Hatfield.

Spasms of coughing sounded below. The voice called, "We give up! We're bein' baked like spuds in here. Don't shoot."

"Drop yore Colts and come out one at a time with yore hands on yore heads," ordered the officer. He spoke to Kurt Frolicher. "Get down there fast and tell Fest they're comin' through. Check 'em and hold 'em in the yard."

Kurt hurried off. The draught was making the upstairs hall very uncomfortable. Hatfield slowly retreated with his aides. It wasn't likely now that any of them would come up those front stairs.

GETTING down, he joined Gaston Fest, as alert cowmen checked off the rustlers and Wier's roadbuilders. Eyes smarting, faces flushed from the heat of the blazing front wall, the fight had gone out of them. Sullenly the outlaws marched forth in line, hands clasped on top of their heads. Fest and his friends removed any hidden weapons they tried to hold out, and a growing pool of prisoners showed in the *Biergarten,* covered by cocked guns.

Gasca limped forth, one leg bleeding from a Ranger slug. The Mexican bandit's hangdog expression as he fearfully glanced at the grim officer told how cowed he was. They had most of the cowthieves and all the huskies imported from Austin.

"Where's Wier, Gasca?" demanded Hatfield, towering over the Mexican.

"I do not savvy, beeg Senor!" growled Gasca.

Hatfield took a step toward him and Gasca quailed. Gasca opened his mouth to speak but one of the roadbuilders answered for him:

"Wier run out on us first crack out of the box," he growled angrily. "Left us here to fry, cuss him."

The baron had gone out a side window after the explosions. Perhaps he had sensed defeat, that Jim Hatfield was upon him.

CHAPTER XVIII

Report

NOW that the outlaws had been captured, Hatfield could not permit Dolf Wier to escape. There was a chance that the plaza holders had downed the fleeing killer.

"Mister Fest! Get those women and everybody else out before they suffocate. See to it these hombres don't stampede."

The great victory was soured for him by the loss of Buck Robertson and Aje Pickett. Still he refused to relinquish all hope, he could not. He swung to address the prisoners who stared at the man who had defeated them against such odds.

"I want to know where Pickett and that boy Buck, the one yuh called Emile, have been taken. I'll turn loose the man who tells me."

A rustler chirped in, eager to win the offer of freedom. "They run 'em west, Ranger, into the hills. Wier wouldn't trust Tully with 'em. Bandolier Ed was set on killin' Pickett. But Wier figgered they were worth more as hostages."

"Yuh savvy the spot?" asked Hatfield.

"No. Wier's bodyguards took 'em off."

The Ranger nodded to his friends, hurried to a side gate, unbolted it and strode out. Whistling up the golden sorrel, he mounted and swung toward the front of Schorp's. The wooden sections of the

saloon wall were burning, sending off clouds of black smoke. The wagon was nearly gone, the oil drum still helping feed the flames.

Old Fritz Frolicher, in charge of the holders, hailed him, anxious as to the outcome in the garden.

"What's the word, Ranger?"

"All over. We've taken 'em. Tully's cashed in his chips."

Frolicher gazed admiringly at the rugged officer who had saved them. "Then yuh've done it, suh."

"Yep. Did yuh spot Wier?"

Frolicher nodded. "He was among the first and we missed him, I'm sorry to say. He seized a horse from a neighbor over there and rode west. We captured several rustlers, though, and wounded a couple. Four escaped the way Wier did and took off in all directions."

Hatfield considered the information. There wasn't much light left, hardly an hour. Wier was on his way, with a fair start.

"He's got half a dozen or so special guards, and no doubt they're the ones holdin' Buck and Pickett. I must overtake him, Mister Frolicher. I'll get goin'. Ask Fest to start some young fellers after me, will yuh? A dozen ought to turn the trick."

He moved away. The sun was nearly gone and banks of clouds were ruby red, fading off to delicate pinks and purples. A warm wind blew in his face as he pushed west and gave the sorrel his head.

Here was rolling range, studded with rock outcrops and patches of brush and trees. North lay the cattle land, with those dead areas through it, the properties of Gaston Fest and other cowmen. The keen, gray-green eyes hunted for sign of Dolf Wier, fleeing from the Ranger might, from the consequences of his evil acts.

To his right a few hundred yards he noted a faint haze, disturbed by the breeze. He cast that way, sniffing risen dust marking a rider's trail. In softer spots he could see fresh marks of shod hoofs. Someone had recently passed at full run.

"I'll take a chance," he decided. From what hints he had obtained, Wier had gone westward to some point where his trusted guards were hiding. This dust might have been left by an escaped rustler, dashing for tall timber. But Hatfield could not make a better choice.

When he reached the rising valley margin, screened by mesquite and other growth, he had gained on the other horse, for Goldy flashed along with phenomenal speed. If it was Wier, he must have snatched whatever animal he could have come by in his desperate plight.

HIGHER and higher they climbed, the sorrel's head down as he labored up the rocky slopes. They reached a ridge from which Hatfield could look back and see the quaint old town in the valley, the high gables pointing to a painted sky. A column of black smoke rolled up where Otto Schorp's was burning and between the river and the hills galloped a bunch of horsemen, Hatfield's reinforcements striving to overtake him.

"Half an hour till dark, that's all," he told Goldy, and wiped his brow with his bandanna.

The gelding breasted another rise. In a basinlike dip ahead, broken by clumps of low bush, he saw Dolf Wier quirting and spurring a dark-hided mustang. Hatfield turned quickly back. He did not wish his enemy to sight him yet. It was a relief, anyway, to know that the tracks he had followed had been made by Wier.

The Baron went on, dropping below the hump beyond. Hatfield cautiously followed, hoping against hope that Wier would lead him to the captives.

He waved an arm signal to those after him, to ride quietly and hold down their pace.

A quarter mile on, Wier swung between two granite boulders. Hatfield came up, dropped rein, the last of the daylight glowing upon him. He drew a Colt, hearing voices past the gate. He pressed close to one of the big rock shoulders, gun up and cocked.

"Hurry!" That was Wier, speaking to his bodyguard. "Those fools let the Ranger smash 'em. Here Blucher, here Bismarck! Jake, hand me my bag, and saddle that blue gelding for me; this horse is no good. I lost Blackie at Schorp's. The fools, serves 'em right. Jump to it!"

"How about these two cusses, suh?"

"Pickett!" called Wier. "Stand up, unless you wish to die lyin' down."

"Better not, Wier," advised Aje Pickett. "The Ranger will make yuh pay for it.

Yuh don't aim to hurt this boy, do yuh?"

"Neither of you will ever testify against me," snarled Wier. Some of the intense hate he felt for Hatfield made his voice shake.

Whatever he could do to injure the Ranger, Wier would do.

Hatfield edged around the rock jut. Wier stood to his left, his side exposed. Several armed retainers, trusted aides he hired on a permanent basis, bunched about Wier, to the Ranger's right.

"Hold up, Wier," ordered the officer sharply.

Wier jumped, glanced around. His face contorted with fury, his jaw thrust out when he saw who it was.

The wolfhounds, tied by steel chains to a scrub cedar, began barking and straining at the intruder.

"Kill him!" howled Wier.

He had a revolver in one hand, for he had been about to shoot into the helpless Pickett and Buck, trussed and lying nearby.

The baron's picked men were tougher than the usual run of outlaws. They went for their weapons, obedient to Wier's order. In a breath, Wier dropped, turning his pistol toward the tall officer by the rock.

Something shrieked past Hatfield, striking the stone and spraying him with stinging bits of metal and shale. But his hand held steady as he raised his thumb from the hammer spur of his Colt.

The heavy bullet from the Ranger gun knocked Wier off his feet. He sprawled in the glade, thrashing about. Hatfield had to jump back for the others were swinging on him to blast him.

A loud yell rang in the hills as Hatfield's friends rushed up. "Come on!" ordered the Ranger.

They joined him, and on foot charged through the narrow gap. But Wier's bunch, seeing their chief down, lost their nerve. They were running off into the bush, hunting escape.

Hatfield hustled to check on Dolf Wier. His first slug had pierced the Baron from side to side, hit the heart. Wier was done.

"Ranger! Ranger!" cried Buck Robertson. "I knew yuh'd make it!"

"Howdy, Hatfield," grinned Aje Pickett.

They were battered but still alive, not seriously injured. . . .

TWO days later, Ranger Jim Hatfield, having left Buck at Anita's cottage, dropped rein at Austin headquarters and went in to report to Captain Bill McDowell.

It was a pleasing tale, of Dolf Wier's defeat. McDowell looked like the cat who had eaten the canary as he heard the succinct summary. But he could read between the lines, fill it out for himself and imagine the Ranger's mighty deeds.

"There's these asphalt lakes all through that range, suh," nodded Hatfield. "Wier had to have 'em. He held big street-pavin' contracts with cities like Houston, San Antonio and the capital, as well as road-buildin' agreements with a bunch of counties. He stood to win a fortune. The railroad's not far off and he could easy run a spur in and load the stuff for shipment. Wier figgered he could shove out Fest and the few owners of the land without much trouble."

Hatfield had been invited to the wedding of Aje Pickett and Colette Fest. The Castroville folks could sell asphalt if they wished, and they were already driving their combined herd to Kansas.

McDowell cleared his throat, rattled a sheaf of reports. "A great job, Hatfield. I savvy yuh'd rather be on the go than idle around. Listen to this!"

Soon, the old captain stood in the yard waving good-by to his star officer, as Jim Hatfield again set out to enforce the law of the Lone Star empire.

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

GUNS OF MIST RIVER

Another Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

by LEE BOND

Littlejohn faces a choice between Comanche torture or—hanging!

Long Sam's manacled hands seized his two black-butted six-shooters

LONG SAM'S HANGNOOSE SWAP

IT WAS his big, splay-footed roan gelding, Sleeper, that warned Long Sam Littlejohn of the danger. Long Sam had been hipped around in the saddle, smoke-colored eyes watching the cedar slope up which he was riding. Outlawed, with a cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, there was nothing strange in Littlejohn's watching his backtrail, even here in this lonely land of cedar brakes that fringed the Texas plains.

Back there somewhere, rode Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal who worked out of Austin. The gaunt, tall outlaw had been worrying about that, his mind wholly absorbed with scanning the country behind him, when Sleeper suddenly broke stride, snorting.

"Judas!" Long Sam yelped, whirling in the saddle.

Even as he whirled, something hit the upper tip of his left shoulder with such force that he was sent toppling backwards, eyes goggling at the arrow that stuck there. Sleeper bounded sidewise when a patch of brush dead ahead erupted three coppery savages, who leaped forward with the high, gobbling yells of Comanches, scalping knives flashing as they sprang towards Long Sam.

The Indians were unusually loud-mouthed, shouldering and elbowing each other rowdily as they advanced, each trying his straining best to be the one to lift the white man's hair.

"They're full of firewater, sure as thunder!" Long Sam muttered.

His bony hands moved then, reaching for the brace of black-butted six-shooters that were holstered at his thighs. The Indians saw the guns wink in the early morning sunlight, but they yelled all the louder, lunging towards their intended victim with even more speed. Then suddenly they were halted, their sinewy, almost naked bodies jerking and spinning and falling as the black-butted guns in the outlaw's hands began a roaring chant of death.

"Bushwackin' sons of devils!" Long Sam gritted.

The gaunt outlaw sat up, glanced at the blood that was dripping from the shoulder of his black sateen shirt where the arrow stuck through.

"Here goes!" he said huskily.

LONG SAM gripped the arrow behind the tip of his left shoulder, set his teeth hard together, and drew the shaft on through the wound. The earth spun and tilted crazily. The next thing he knew he was stretched out on his back, trying dazedly to convince himself that he was having a nightmare, not actually hearing the gravelly voice of deputy Joe Fry!

But he found it was no pain-induced dream. Fry was there, a stocky, blunt-jawed man who had eyes as cold and gray as honed steel. Fry wore a checkered brown suit, a brown derby, and a white shirt with a black string tie, and button shoes. He was squatting on his heels, a cocked six-shooter in his right hand. He gripped a frayed-out cigar stub in one corner of his cold-lipped mouth, and was cursing Long Sam angrily as he jabbed the outlaw's ribs.

"Come out of it, you crane-legged imitation of a human bein'!" the deputy was saying harshly.

The gaunt outlaw tried to move, only to discover that he was lying on his own hands and arms. He rolled sluggishly over, a growl of kindling anger bubbling in his lean throat when he learned that his wrists were linked together behind his back with handcuffs.

"What's the matter, Sammy, losin' yore nerve?" Fry laughed jarringly. "You got a nicked shoulder, when you tangled with those three Comanches. And you passed out like a pilgrim with his first bullet wound."

Long Sam got awkwardly to his feet, but had to stand with spurred boots planted far apart when dizziness and nausea assailed him. His flat-crowned black hat had fallen back, and he shook his head to toss ropes of yellow hair out of his pain-glazed eyes as he watched Joe Fry.

"There's been Indian trouble up here somewhere, Joe," he said gravely.

"I see the war paint smeared on the ugly mugs of them three you downed." Fry shrugged blocky shoulders.

"Take a look at what's danglin' from the buckskin bands around their waists!" Long Sam said flatly.

"Each of these three devils has two fresh scalps!" the deputy blurted. "And two of the six scalps come from the heads of women!"

"From the heads of white women, at that," Long Sam droned. "These bucks were drunk, Joe."

"What'd you do, catch 'em and smell their breaths before you shot 'em?" Fry countered sarcastically.

Long Sam gritted his teeth to keep back the reply that came to the tip of his tongue.

"Fetch my hoss, Fry, and let's get out of here," the outlaw said gravely.

Fry walked down-slope to a rawboned gray horse, swung up into the saddle, and took a lariat rope from the pommel, building a small noose as he eyed Sleeper. Long Sam saw his own shell-studded belts and holstered guns swinging from Fry's saddle horn, and realized that the deputy had disarmed him before he regained consciousness. He hoped grimly

Fry would let the guns and belts remain where they were.

"Joe, look out!" Long Sam bawled suddenly.

"What are you up to now?" Fry snapped.

"Up yonder on the rim!" Long Sam gasped. "I saw an Indian peek over at us, then dodge back."

"Sheep dip!" Fry hooted. "Keep yore big mouth shut, while I go dab a noose on that cussed Sleeper nag of yours!"

BUT suddenly Fry dropped the rope, squawking in alarm as he yanked the six-shooter from beneath the tail of his coat. A half-dozen mounted Comanches had sailed over the rim of the slope, their voices lifted to those gobbling, blood-curdling yells. They were armed with repeating rifles, and began firing promptly, although their running mounts spoiled their attempts to aim.

Long Sam saw Fry begin firing at the Indians. He dropped to the ground, slid his hips and thighs backwards through his own shackled arms. When he jumped to his feet, manacled wrists in front of him now, he saw the Indians streaking away along the slope, heading for a cedar thicket. Long Sam started running towards Sleeper, but halted on skidding boot heels when a bullet burned lightly across his left side.

"You'd better hold it, smart feller!" Fry said coldly.

"Joe, what's into you?" Long Sam groaned. "Unless we get out of here, those warwhoops will jump us again."

"Got your hands in front of you while I was busy, did you?" Fry rasped. "Well, go ahead and pile onto that nag."

Long Sam swore under his breath, but did not argue. He strode to Sleeper, picked up trailing reins, and mounted easily to the hand-tooled black saddle despite shackled wrists. Joe Fry was right behind him, reloaded pistol leveled.

"Head for the rim, up yonder," Fry ordered.

"Are you locoed?" Long Sam snorted. "If we get out on the plains, them Comanches will be on us in nothin' flat. Our only hope is to head back down these ravines, where there's cover."

"Do what you're told!" Fry barked. "There's a wagon train out yonder on the plains. We're headin' for that."

"How do you know there's a wagon train out there?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"I had quit these brakes and was startin' towards the wagons I had seen when I heard you beefin' these Indians down here!" Fry chuckled drily.

"I can't figure what wagons are doin' down here," Long Sam muttered. "There's sure no trail through this part of the country. Was it a big outfit?"

"Three wagons," Fry grunted. "Shut up, and get movin'."

Long Sam started Sleeper up the cedar slope, a puzzled frown lumping thin yellow brows above his somber eyes. He saw the three big canvas converted Conestogas the moment he topped the slope, heading west across the plains. After a moment's watching, the gaunt outlaw suddenly sat bolt upright in the saddle, forgetting the dull agony of the wound in his shoulder.

"What in thunderation!" he cried, reining in.

"What's the matter with you?" Fry snapped angrily.

"Take a look at those wagons, Joe," Long Sam droned.

"All I see is three wagons, crawlin' along the prairie!" the deputy snorted. "Get movin', before I bend this gun over your thick head!"

"Four teams hooked to each of those wagons," Long Sam said slowly. "The ground is firm, for there hasn't been a rain in three weeks. But look at the way those horses are layin' into their collars, Joe!"

"I won't tell you to get movin' again!" Fry howled.

Long Sam touched Sleeper with dull rowels, riding slowly towards the four wagons, smoky eyes narrow and alert. Two men rode the swaying seat of the lead wagon, but each of the other two wagons had only a driver.

"Somethin' fishy about that outfit yonder, Joe," the gaunt outlaw said as the deputy ranged up even with him.

"What's fishy about three wagons crossin' these plains?" the deputy grunted.

"Those wagons yonder are overloaded, for one thing," Long Sam replied. "On top of that, there's no cavvy of spare horses, no outriders and the canvas covers are closed tight, meanin' there are no

women and kids in the schooners."

"So what?" Fry snorted.

"So you'd better change your mind and keep away from that outfit," the outlaw retorted. "I've got a hunch those four gents don't want company."

"Wagoners are always glad to have company," Fry scoffed. "What makes you think this bunch would be any different?"

THE outlaw shrugged.

"The way they've quit their wagons and are ridin' out to meet us with Winchesters says they don't want us gettin' too close," Long Sam replied.

"They're all buckskin men," Fry said sharply. "Scouts, takin' three wagonloads of supplies in to some of General Crook's scout patrols, no doubt!"

"Wrong guess, runt!" Long Sam said harshly. "That big walloper in the lead happens to be Vint Muller. The sawed-off galoot directly behind Muller is Lew Castle. The third one back, the tall, skinny one, is Jake Carter. The scrawny hellion bringin' up the rear is Ott Bracken."

"Vint Muller and his three men, hey?" Fry grinned. "Well that bears out my hunch that they were scouts, takin' army supplies in to some isolated patrol."

"Scouts, your eye!" Long Sam growled. "Vint Muller and those three men of his are about the most dangerous pack of renegade trail wolves on the frontier."

"Bull!" Fry grunted. "Vint Muller is a trader, known all over the west."

"Vint Muller is a cold-blooded murderer and thief," Long Sam retorted. "His specialty is locatin' settlements or wagon caravans where there are valuable goods and plenty of livestock, then roundin' up a batch of Comanches or other hostiles, gettin' the warwhoops drunk, and settin' them onto their settlement or caravan. When the Indians get through with their butcherin', Vint Muller and those three men yonder with him move in, pick up everything of value, and hightail."

"Keep your lip buttoned when Muller and his men get here, or I'll pistol-whip you!" Fry growled. "What you're up to, of course, is to start a growl with Muller and his men so's they won't let me keep you with them until we hit civilization."

"Rememberin' those six fresh scalps on the belts of the three dead Comanches, back yonder, would keep my lip buttoned around Muller and his bunch," Long Sam said grimly.

"What do you mean by that?" Fry asked, eyeing his prisoner sharply.

"Those overloaded wagons, yonder, and half tipsy Comanche bucks sashayin' around here, Joe, could mean but one thing," Long Sam said flatly. "There's been a raid on a caravan out here somewhere. After the Indians got in their licks, Vint Muller and his men showed up, put the most valuable goods from the whole caravan in those three wagons yonder, and are headin' somewhere to hide their loot until the excitement over the raid dies down."

"You sound as if you've been on a straight diet of peyote for a week or more!" the deputy marshal blared. "But remember what I said about keepin' that lip buttoned, Sam!"

"Don't worry about me antagonizin' that bunch any, runt!" Long Sam snorted. "I don't want this yellow top-knot of mine danglin' from the war lance or G-string belly-band of any of Spotted Hand's hair-snatchers."

"Spotted Hand?" Fry echoed, hard eyes boring the gaunt outlaw's sober face.

"Spotted Hand is a big, tough Comanche buck who broke away from the main tribe about a year ago, because some of the older chiefs didn't want to declare open war on all white settlers," Long Sam said quietly. "Spotted Hand has over a hundred young hot-heads following him, and they've pulled off some of the bloodiest raids in frontier history. My hunch is, Joe, that the three warwhoops I shot, and the six you couldn't seem to hit, were some of Spotted Hand's bunch."

"Spotted Hand is the army's headache," Fry admitted.

Long Sam glanced at Vint Muller and the other three renegades, frowning uneasily. They had spread out now, slowed their mounts to an easy trot, and were advancing with Winchesters leveled.

"You'd better pouch that pistol, Joe," the gaunt outlaw warned. "Muller and his men might misunderstand you ridin' towards 'em with a naked six-shooter in your fist."

"This six-pistol in my hand, and the cuffs on your wrists, ought to make it plain that you're my prisoner."

"You blasted little show-off!" Long Sam retorted. "If my own hide wasn't in danger, I'd wish Muller and his three cutthroats would open up on us. Maybe a few slugs whistlin' around your ears would— Joe, look out!"

LONG SAM'S voice ended on a sharp sound of alarm. Vint Muller and his three men, obviously following prearranged plans, suddenly halted their horses, jumped out of saddles, and leveled rifles across the saddle seats. The four long guns blazed almost simultaneously, and Joe Fry was cursing furiously as he fought his lank gray mount to stop the horse's plunging. Two slugs had plowed the turf less than a yard from the gray's hoofs. Two other slugs had blasted sod close to Sleeper's splayed hoofs, too. But at a low word from Long Sam, the old roan stopped. Long Sam shoved his manacled hands high, palms forward.

"Vint!" he bawled. "You and Ott and Lew and Jake lay off the fireworks!"

The four men crouching behind their horses jerked upright, startled at the sound of their names. But they kept those rifles leveled, and Long Sam saw big Vint Muller's teeth flash white against his bronzed face as he grinned.

"Lew, you and Jake keep your guns on them two, yonder!" Muller's deep voice boomed out. "We'll prance down there, and see what this is all about. That's Long Sam Littlejohn with the handcuffs on his wrists. If that duded-up thing with the pistol in his hand is a badge-man of some kind, then we've got us a laugh on that Littlejohn hellion, for sure!"

Long Sam glanced sidewise at Joe Fry, who had quieted the skittish gray, and was sitting there with the six-shooter in his fist, turning as red as a turkey gobbler's wattles. Fry was courageous, shrewd, and one of the most successful manhunters in the Southwest. But there was a streak of prideful cockiness in Joe Fry that made him unpopular even among those who appreciated his worth as a peace officer. And that pride was wounded now, Long Sam knew.

"Easy, Joe!" the outlaw said guardedly. "Ignore Muller's remarks, or you'll get us both hurt."

Fry cursed through grinding teeth, almost biting the frayed-out cigar butt in two. But he let it go at that, for the renegades were coming forward.

"Vint, this gent beside me here is Joe Fry, the famous deputy U. S. marshal, from Austin," Long Sam sang out.

"That drummerish lookin' galoot is Joe Fry, the scalp-huntin' depity marshal?" Ott Bracken shrilled, halting in his tracks.

Vint Muller halted, too, his broad, dark face suddenly flattening into a mask of angry uneasiness. Muller's milky blue eyes stared unwinkingly from recesses beneath thick, black brows, and Long Sam felt a chill course along his spine when he saw the big buckskin renegade's hands tighten on the cocked rifle.

"Muller, I don't like the way you and these men of yours are actin'!" Joe Fry bit the words out coldly.

"All Fry wants, Muller, is a little help ridin' herd on me until he can get me to jail," Long Sam said hastily.

"I'll do my own talkin', noose-bait!" Fry snapped furiously at his prisoner.

SAM shrugged, relieved to see that Vint Muller and Ott Bracken had lost most of their uneasiness now, and were whispering

"I'm Joe Fry, deputy marshal, Muller," Fry said crisply. "I have credentials, if you want to see them."

"Howdy." Muller bobbed his head slightly. "I'll take yore word without lookin' at any credentials, Fry."

"Fair enough, Muller," Fry grinned. "Now let's get on to your wagons, and get rollin'. I've been on this slippery Littlejohn hellion's trail for over a week, straight runnin', and I'm wore out."

"Sorry, Fry!" Vint Muller said bluntly. "I'm the only trader on the frontier who can come down here and work this country without bein' jumped by the Comanches. The reason I'm let alone is because I never have anybody except Ott Bracken, Lew Castle and Jake Carter with me. If I let you or any other stranger ride along with me, the Injuns would get uneasy."

"That's your tough luck!" Fry snapped. "It's a four or five day trip from here to a town where I'll find a jail to stick this Littlejohn hellion in. I don't aim to try guardin' the slippery devil that long without any help, so make up your mind that my prisoner and me will go along with

your wagon, Mr. Muller!"

"You stop joshin', Fry, and get on to wherever you want to go with Littlejohn," Muller said flatly. "You're not pokin' along with my outfit, and that's final."

"You and your men have had trouble with Littlejohn in the past?" Fry asked, anger flushing his blunt features.

"None to speak of," Muller said quickly. "About a year ago, he slipped into a trade camp I had established down here, and destroyed a batch of wh—er—trade goods for me."

"I dumped four barrels of whiskey and watched the ground drink it up, Joe," Long Sam chuckled drily. "Vint didn't like the idea when I told him what I aimed to do, and I had to cripple his right shoulder with a bullet before he'd see things my way. Ott Bracken, Lew Castle and Jake Carter were off some place deliverin' booze to Spotted Hand and his bunch, or I'd likely have had to bust a few caps at them, too."

"He's lyin', Fry!" Muller said harshly. "I didn't have no whiskey in my camp."

"I wouldn't believe this long-shanked sinner on oath," Fry grunted. "Anyhow, I savvy why you don't want him in your camp, seein' he dealt you trouble. But he's got to be in your camp a while, for I need somebody to help guard him until I can get him jailed. Vint Muller, Ott Bracken, Lew Castle and Jake Carter, I hereby deputize you four men, and order that you give me the help I need gettin' this prisoner behind bars!"

The four renegades looked thunderstruck. Ott Bracken, Lew Castle and Jake Carter began cursing, glaring at Fry as if he had handed them the insult supreme. But Muller shut them up, his craggy face pale as he turned burning eyes on Joe Fry, who was grinning slyly now.

"Suppose I tell you that me and my men won't act as yore deputies, Fry?" Muller croaked hoarsely.

"If you refuse to help me, I'd see to it the government officers took a very keen interest in your activities!" Joe said bluntly.

"Vint, the smartest thing we can do is blast both these meddlin' sons!" Ott Bracken squalled. "If Fry tags along with us, he'd see what's in them wagons, sure as—"

The rifle in Bracken's skinny hands suddenly came up, the barrel of it jabbing towards Joe Fry. The pistol in Fry's blocky fist tilted, belched flame and smoke and thunderous sound. Bracken's Winchester roared, but the scrawny tough was already toppling backwards, blood spurting from a bullet hole in his face.

Joe Fry's gray mount bawled in terror, smashed sidewise into Sleeper, and both horses almost went down. And in that moment while the two mounts were staggering and fighting to keep their feet, Long Sam's manacled hands plunged down, seized his two black-butted six-shooters that bobbed in their holsters on belts looped about Fry's saddle horn. The deputy cursed thickly, chopped at Long Sam with the smoking gun in his fist, then blasted a shot at the gaunt outlaw as the two horses reeled apart.

"Get 'em both!" Long Sam heard Vint Muller bawl. He flattened out along Sleeper's scrawny neck, jamming spurs against the roan's tough hide.

THE bronc grunted hoarsely, sailed forward in a mighty lunge, and hit big Vint Muller full in the chest with one shoulder. Muller's over-sized moccasins came up where his hat had been. Long Sam saw Sleeper's wicked head slash sidewise, heard Lew Castle's hoarse scream as the roan's teeth closed over his shoulder. Sleeper wrenched savagely, and Lew Castle went tumbling over the grass, still screaming. Long Sam straightened then, shoved the left-hand gun under the waistband of his pants, and picked up Sleeper's reins, bringing the roan around.

"Judas!" the gaunt outlaw croaked, ducking violently as a bullet whipped the hat off his head.

Sam saw lank Jake Carter step from behind a fog of powder smoke, jack a fresh cartridge into his rifle, and whip the long gun up for another try. The outlaw's bony face tightened, and the six-shooter in his right hand roared. Carter staggered, blasted a shot at the sky, then sat down hard, clawing at his skinny middle with hands that turned swiftly red.

But Long Sam had no time to watch Jake Carter just then. Vint Muller was on his feet now, a six-shooter in each fist, and he whirled to face the sound of Long Sam's shot.

"Hold it, Muller!" Long Sam warned. "Lift them guns another inch, and I'll—"

The outlaw's voice was drowned in the roar of Muller's twin guns. Long Sam rocked, almost knocked out of the saddle by a slug that raked across his ribs. Muller whooped hoarsely, lunged out of the powder fog his own guns had made, and started chopping the guns down for another burst. The gaunt outlaw's thumb flipped the hammer of the Colt he held twice, and his smoky eyes watched coldly while Vint Muller took two running steps towards him, then pitch over as if a rope had tripped him, coughing a red spray over the green grass.

"Drop that gun, Castle!" Long Sam roared.

Lew Castle whirled away from Joe Fry, who lay sprawled on the ground. Long Sam jumped Sleeper towards Castle, smoking Colt leveled. And suddenly Castle's sweating, white face began to twist and twist, and he let the six-shooter slide out of his fingers.

Long Sam halted Sleeper, looked down past Lew Castle at Joe Fry, who was moaning groggily. Fry's derby was gone, and the whole top of his sandy-thatched head was wet with blood that welled from a deep gash. Long Sam glanced back at Castle, who was whimpering and backing away from Sleeper.

"Don't let that hoss in reach of me again, Littlejohn!" the chunky tough croaked.

Long Sam snorted at the shaken gunman, slid out of the saddle, and stepped to Joe Fry's side. He pushed the pistol into his waistband beside its mate, then squatted on his heels and began searching the badly dazed deputy's pockets. Long Sam's head swam from pain and shock, and there was an unnatural pallor on his gaunt cheeks. Yet he grinned as he found the key that would remove the handcuffs from his wrists. Haste made him fumble, but he soon had the handcuffs off, walking towards Castle with them dangling from his left hand.

"Leave me alone, Littlejohn," the man whined. "Can't you see how bad yore hoss tore this left shoulder of mine?"

"What's in those wagons, out yonder?" Long Sam jerked his head towards the three Conestogas.

"Household goods, farmin' tools and the like," Castle groaned.

"Vint Muller and you three hellions who took his orders set Spotted Hand and his bunch on a wagon train some time yesterday, didn't you?" the gaunt outlaw asked harshly.

CASTLE'S yellow eyes shifted away, turned down to study the red spot his own blood was making on the grass.

"Where and when was the raid, you black-hearted son?" Long Sam barked angrily.

"Postoak Crick ford, yesterday mornin'," Castle gulped. "It was a ten wagon caravan, but them fool Injuns destroyed most of the goods by settin' the caravan on fire. Me and Vint and Ott and Jake didn't make the haul we figgered, on account of so much of the stuff burned up. And that was the end of Spotted Hand and most of his bunch, too."

"What do you mean, that was the end of Spotted Hand and his murderin' pack?" Long Sam snapped.

"A bunch of blue-clad cavalry was on patrol, and seen the smoke from them wagons," Lew Castle panted. "They tied into the Injuns, killed Spotted Hand in the first skirmish, and was still chasin' bunches of his braves at dark, last night."

"How did Vint Muller and you other three hellions get away with those three wagons full of loot with the army there?" Long Sam wanted to know.

"We had them wagons loaded, and was pulled off a mile from the burned wagons, when that yaller-legged Lieutenant Frank Lynn come faunchin' down to see us," Lew Castle grunted. "Vint made out like us fellers had been camped up Postoak Crick above the ford, and that we had seen the smoke and drove down to see what the trouble was. That Yankee officer acted like he didn't believe us, but one of his sojers come runnin' up and said they had the Injuns located, so the lieutenant goes spraddlin' away at a high lope. Nine of Spotted Hand's braves came by our camp at dawn this mornin', and told us what took place. If yuh and that Fry hellion hadn't come chousin' along— Hey, what's the idea!"

Lew Castle's voice ended on a quavery yell. Long Sam had seized his unwounded right arm, and snapped one link of the handcuffs about the hairy wrist.

"The idea is, Castle, that I'm too chicken hearted to do what I ought to do—which is cut your throat with a dull knife!" the gaunt outlaw rasped. "But come along, you sneakin', whiskey-peddlin' renegade."

Long Sam dragged Lew Castle over to where Joe Fry was still groaning and muttering and trying to get on his feet. The deputy's bloody face twisted as Long Sam approached. He began groping dazedly around the ground, hunting for his gun.

"Relax, runt," Long Sam said wearily. "Your gun is off to the left, a dozen feet away. Here, let me give you somethin'."

Long Sam reached down, took hold of Fry's left wrist, and pulled the deputy to his feet. Just as Fry got his balance Long Sam snapped the free link of the handcuff about his wrist, then stepped back.

"Adios, runt!" the outlaw chuckled. "You want to hang somebody so sweatin' bad, there's sure a good candidate I've handed you."

"I—I ain't done nothin'!" Lew Castle began. "Fry, this Littlejohn cuss beefed Vint Muller and Jake Carter. I seen him shoot 'em both down, and—"

"Shut up!" Fry snarled at Castle. "I couldn't come out of it enough to get up, get a gun in my fist, and a bead on Littlejohn. But I heard you talkin' to him, tellin' him about the raid up yonder on Postoak Creek, yesterday mornin'. Castle, you're about the lowest specimen of humanity I've ever come across. I'll see that you hang for your crimes, you scurvy hellion!"

"Atta boy, Joe!" Long Sam approved.

"Pipe down, you crane-legged whelp!" Fry glared at him. "Pitch me the key you filched out of my pocket to skin yourself out of these bracelets. I don't aim to ride side-by-side with a thing like this Lew Castle from here to the handiest jail."

"You've got a bad habit of lettin' prisoners escape from you, Joe," Long Sam grinned.

"Give me that key and stop braggin'!" Fry howled. "Then go round up a hoss for me and this noose-bait!"

The gaunt outlaw heeled around, started prowling through the grass, gathering up guns. When he had every weapon accounted for, he lugged them to Sleeper, mounted clumsily, and rode away, with Fry cursing uneasily. Long Sam spilled the guns to the sod a quarter of a mile away, then circled back, gathering up the four saddled horses that had belonged to Vint Muller and his men, as well as Joe Fry's gray. The gaunt outlaw got his belts off Fry's saddle horn, buckled them on and slid his pistols into soft holsters.

"All right, quit dilly-dallyin' around, consarn you, and fetch me that handcuff key and a couple of them saddled horses!" Fry yelled at him.

Long Sam got ropes off the saddles of the horses he had rounded up, cut the ropes into lengths, and soon had the five horses on leads. Joe Fry's voice was lifted in a screech of rage that made the gaunt outlaw chuckle.

"You blasted horse thief!" Fry howled. "What do you think will happen to me and this thing you've shackled me to, if you leave us out here?"

"Yonder stands three good Conestogas, with teams to pull 'em, runt!" Long Sam grinned. "I'm takin' these saddle ponies and their ridin' gear with me. But you and Castle can have the wagons."

"It'll take me weeks to reach civilization in those blasted wagons, you hellion!" Fry wailed.

"Which suits me just fine, since I'll have plenty of time to hit back for the thicket country down along the Rio Grande, and let these wounds heal up," Long Sam laughed. "I sorta made a deal with the hangman, by swappin' him Lew Castle's neck in place of my own. If I pick up a few cash dollars boot in the deal off the sale of these ponies and the gear they're packin', why should you complain, Joe?"

Long Sam rode away, chuckling despite the misery of his throbbing wounds. Joe Fry was fairly turning the air blue, but Long Sam did not even look back as he jogged towards the cedar thickets on the slopes and along the gullies that lay beyond the edge of the plains.

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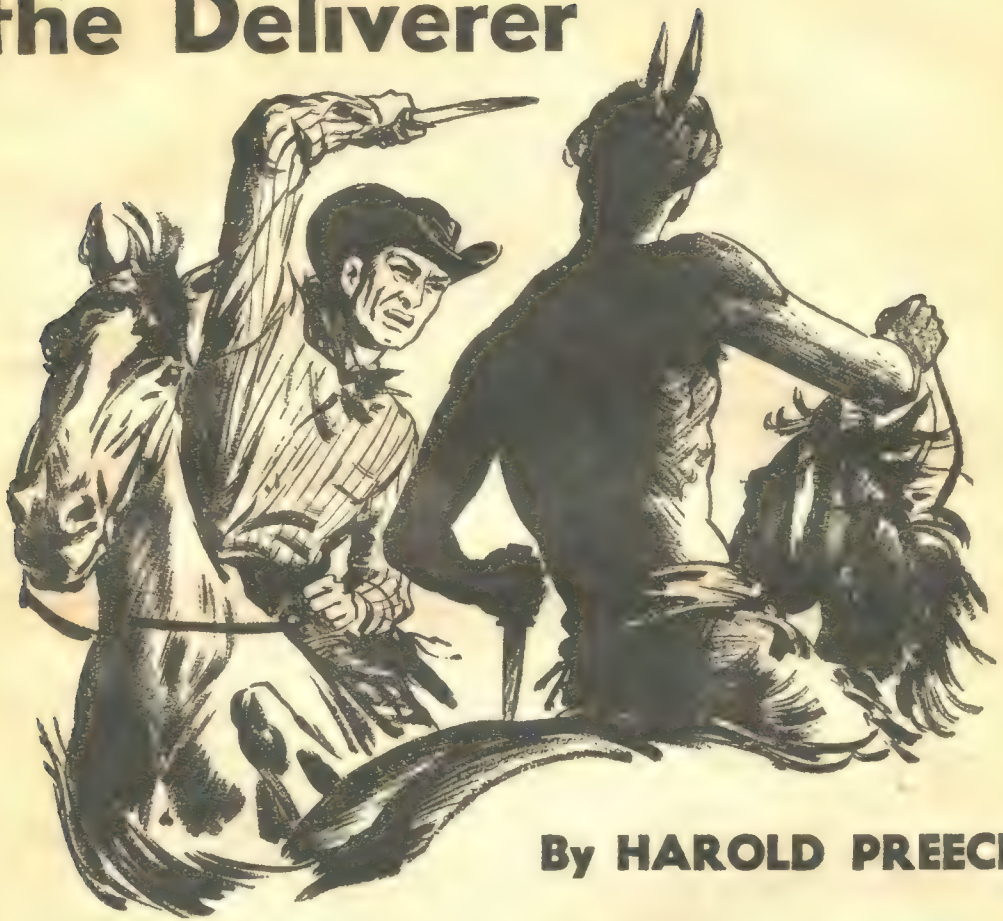
ANOTHER OUTLAW LITTLEJOHN STORY NEXT ISSUE!

LONG SAM VENTS A BRAND by LEE BOND

SUL ROSS, the Deliverer



By HAROLD PREECE

This fearless foe of hostile Indians fought a deadly feud with the celebrated Comanche chief, Mohee, and won honors in the Civil War!

EACH man had sworn to get the other. But one counted notches scratched on his shootin' iron. And the other counted scalps dangling from his snakeskin belt.

They were the two fightin'est men in Texas—the Irishman and the Indian. Down in San Antonio, a Mexican *caballero* of the cockpits had named one of his champion chickens *El Capitano* Sul Ross, and the other *El Jefe* Mohee. Texas had waited for them to square accounts for ten years. In Texas, the years of a feud tick off fast like minutes on a clock.

It had started when they were kids. It had kept growing, fresh and green like the

corn fields the Comanches raided. Ohio-born, Lawrence Sullivan Ross had begun target practice for the showdown after he and his dad had barely outrode a big band of warriors who had surprised them on the Brazos River.

There'd been one kid Comanche in the war party. He was tall for his age like Sul Ross, but two years older. And during that ten-mile chase to the outskirts of the white settlement, Mohee's mustang had been on the flanks of the young Texan's cowpony.

A Comanche arrow had zoomed from Mohee's bow and grazed his face tauntingly. A Comanche voice had shouted mockingly in the hissing warrior talk that Sul Ross understood as well as the drawling frontier English:

"Ho, my little paleface, you shall be Mohee's slave to polish his arrows as have other little palefaces like you."

The little paleface's answer had been a sudden salvo from his sawed-off carbine. Red blood had spouted from the exposed red arm of Mohee. When they were safe back home, the twelve-year-old boy had turned to his dad, who wore the badge of a Texas Ranger captain.

"You've wanted me to be a business man," Sul said earnestly. "I reckon Texas could use a lot more stores. But you've told me that the Rosses left Ireland because they'd wiped out all the outlaws and needed somebody else to fight. There's still plenty of 'em to fight in Texas. There's one I've got to fight till I stomp him out like St. Patrick stomped out the snakes. That's Mohee."

The boy paused for a minute. "I've got to snatch back all the Texas kids that Mohee and his gang have got cleaning the scalps of their own kinfolks and polishing the arrows that kill them. I'm going to be a Texas Ranger like you."

Father Gives Consent

Captain Shapley P. Ross had looked long at this sprout of St. Patrick and the two gallant Irish clans that had finished the good saint's work by smashing the two-legged snakes. A man, who was Sullivan on one side and Ross on the other, had to be a fighting man.

"Son," he answered. "If I hadn't wanted you to be a fighting man, I oughtn't to have brought you to a fighting state. My boots are still mighty big for you. But you'll grow into 'em."

And it was two men, not a man and a boy, who shook hands on it.

Sul Ross had no more time for kid talk and kid play after that. He rode long miles on scouting expeditions with the Texas Rangers, studying their ways of tracking Indians and their ways of reading Indian signs. He hunted deer and buffalo with the friendly Texas tribes who'd started fighting Comanches a thousand years before Columbus. They'd be good allies when he stepped into his daddy's boots. He learned every Indian dialect spoken from the Red River to the Rio Grande. Talking their language was important, like presents and sacks of cornmeal, in keeping your allies once you'd got 'em.

Next to Ranger Captain John Hughes, he was probably the greatest strategist Texas has ever seen. Sul Ross figured on making every inch of Texas territory hot territory for Comanches, whether they rode across a frontier county or a tribal reservation.

Presently, the friendly Indians were killing as many Comanches as the Texans. And the master mind behind it all was a teen-age youngster who hadn't started shaving.

He was always happy when the friendly Indians brought back white kids who'd been slaves to the Comanches. He took them to his own house until their parents could be located through the slow-moving Texas grapevine.

When he talked to hem, their faces blanched and their teeth chattered at the mention of one name—Mohee.

"He fasts and prays to his gods to have you handed over, Sul," one beaten, half-starved lad told him. "He'll be a big chief in the Comanche nation when he can have a Ranger captain's son to cook his grub and curry his pony."

Sul's lips had got hard and Irish when he heard that. His answer had been his gun, blazing at the wooden targets standing in his backyard.

Mohee Haunts Him

Even when his dad had made him take out time to attend college in Alabama, he

thought more of Mohee than he did of Latin and mathematics. He laid down his sheepskin for a Ranger commission when he got back to Texas. He kissed his pretty sweetheart, Lizzie Tinsley, good-by. And like an Irish knight, he was wearing her ribbon on his shirt when he set out after Mohee, now the scourge of the settlements.

The two old enemies met first in a bitter battle on the treeless Texas Plains. The Rangers had tracked down a gang of Comanches gorging themselves on a stolen steer. Blood of the raw beef was running down the chin of Chief Mohee and mixing with the war paint on his face.

Six warriors died from six bullets as the Rangers sighted the camp. Two more began coughing out their blood on the prairie as two shots from Sul Ross' crack carbine cut through their jugulars. The Indians were mounting their ponies for a getaway when the chief recognized the man he'd sworn to enslave.

Retreat changed into an advance of defiance. From fifty savage throats rose the boastful Comanche battle song. Ten Texas Rangers spurred their horses to meet the charging horde. Ten feet separated white warriors from red when Mohee howled:

"We meet again, Ross, and the gods have heard my prayers. Your companions shall die. But tonight you shall be slave to the great chief of the Comanches."

Storm Awes Indians

Sul Ross dug his knees into the flanks of his horse. He rode straight toward the Comanche chief. And, now, it was hand to hand fighting all around him. His carbine barked, and cut a long, crooked gash across the chief's forehead. A lance in the hands of Mohee nicked the young Ranger's ear. Their horses reared high and pawed air as each drew long knives for close fighting.

"I'll spare your gullet, Ross!" The Comanche laughed. "I'll want to hear it answering meekly like a squaw to Mohee's orders. And the green ribbon of your squaw I'll give to my squaw to honor her chief."

The Ranger's answer was a sudden slash which wounded the Indian. Then there was a quick clap of thunder in the Texas skies. Rain poured down.

It was a bad omen for the Comanches. They wouldn't fight in a storm. Mohee whirled his horse and raced off across the plains with his fleeing warriors. Fifteen of them lay dead, but not one Ranger had been slain.

The Comanches were riding fresh horses and the Rangers tired ones. "I know Mohee's your man, Sul," Captain Rip Ford finally called. "But take him another time. You'll be meeting him plenty more times."

Rip Ford knew his Rangers and knew his Indians. Time after time in that year of 1858—the bloodiest year in Texas history—Sul Ross and Mohee met each other. And each always left his souvenir of a bullet wound or a knife cut on the other man.

And, now, tongues were wagging about them from the Red River to the Rio Grande as bet money floated like the two rivers. Nobody would lay any cash that Mohee would get Sul Ross. Putting money on the redskin would have got you strung up as a renegade right off. But the bets said that Sul Ross would clip Mohee any time from one month to twelve.

"I'm bettin' a thousand the kid'll get him before the year is over," rumbled graying General Sam Houston, the Father of Texas. "I know his breed."

Nine moons of 1858—as the Indians reckon time—were gone when Texas Rangers, friendly red men, and federal troops under the overall command of U. S. Army Major Earl Van Dorn converged on the Comanches denned up in the rugged Wichita Mountains. The friendly Indians, one hundred and twenty-five strong, had been mobilized by their old hunting partner, Sul Ross.

Sul had to feast with them to get them in a fighting mood. He swallowed their chow, sat talking with his redskin friends. He needed these Indians because the harassed Comanches were making their last stand in the Wichitas. Just a few miles away from their hideout was Indian Territory where he figured they belonged.

But he swore to himself that one Comanche wouldn't cross Red River to the safety of the Territory. That Comanche was Mohee.

The two of them wasted no time in formalities when they met in the foothills of the Wichitas that morning of October

1, 1858. Mohee had already withdrawn his band from Texas soil. But Major Van Dorn got mixed up in his boundaries, and the pair of old enemies met on the territory of what is now Oklahoma.

Ross Rides for Mohee

When the whites charged, Sul Ross singled out Mohee. And the chief spurred toward him. This time, not a word was spoken. But their guns roared simultaneously.

Sul Ross saw Mohee crumple in his saddle and come tumbling to the ground. The Ranger was a surprised man. After all these years, he hadn't expected to finish the Comanche chief with one shot.

A dozen more Comanches gasped out their lives under his deadly fire before the half-hour battle was over. As the Comanches galloped off in confusion across the mountains, tepees were burning and fifty-six dead warriors lay sprawled on the ground. Then Sul Ross sought out the body of Mohee.

"We'll bury him with honors," he told his fellow Rangers. "I'd rather have a brave man for an enemy than a coward for a friend."

Six captive warriors sang the Comanche funeral song over the dead chief as Rangers and regulars bowed their heads. A squad of Rangers, commanded by Sul Ross, fired a salute over the hastily-dug grave as the last clod was heaped on the dead chief.

As the last echo of the salvo was dying away, a friendly Indian scout came galloping into camp. On his saddle, sat a three-year old white girl shrieking louder than a Comanche.

"She captive," the Indian grunted. "Maybe Comanches kill her people."

The baby caught sight of Sul and held out her arms. Gently, the Ranger lifted her from saddle and soothed her grief.

"She's mine, Captain," he told Rip Ford. "Her name'll be Lizzie after my girl. There'll be two Lizzie Rosses. Looks like I'm a daddy before I'm a husband."

"Reckon you Irish are always great hands with the ladies, little and big," drawled Rip Ford.

Sam Houston collected his thousand-dollar bet "on the kid," Sul Ross. By that time, Old Sam had been sworn in as governor of Texas. And proudly, he swore in Sul Ross as a Ranger captain.

That was when Sul had just turned twenty-one.

"Son," General Houston told him. "You know more about Indians than I do. And I'm an adopted Cherokee who lived many a year with red folks.

"See what you can do to find a girl named Cynthia Ann Parker. The Comanches kidnaped her when she was five. And I've heard that she grew up to marry a Comanche chief."

Ross Rescues Captives

For the next year, Sul Ross led his Ranger company in mop-up operations against straggling Comanche bands fighting exile to Indian Territory. And soon he found himself with a new name. The parents of the children whom he rescued from Comanche captivity gratefully called him "the Deliverer."

He quizzed every captured Comanche about that missing girl, Cynthia Ann Parker. He made regular reports to Colonel Dan Parker, a prominent Texan who'd spent a fortune trying to locate his long-lost sister.

"If she's still alive, I'll find her," Sul Ross promised.

On a frosty morning of December, 1860, he sighted a Comanche encampment hidden away on the banks of Pease River. He directed his twenty men to charge in a lightning surprise.

The Comanches died like starving wolves too weak to fight. Determined to wipe out the whole band, Sul Ross galloped after an Indian pony carrying two riders.

His fine horse gained steadily on the runty mustang. Twenty yards from them, he fired. Then the rear rider slid off the mustang, and Ross saw that the Indian was a girl. Her arms were clasped tightly around the man in front and the two fell together.

The girl fled. The Indian sprang to his feet with bow drawn. Sul's pistol shot again, but the bullet whizzed past the brave. The brave's arrow pierced his pony, but three more missed Sul Ross before the Texan could get another shot. That shot broke the Comanche's arm. Two more plowed into the brave's chest

before Sul Ross dismounted to finish it on foot.

On a little tree by a sandhill, the mortally wounded Indian took his stand, his body swaying to the tune of the Comanche death song. And the howling wind took it up till it soared like a symphony across the dry wastes of Texas.

His gun still cocked, Sul Ross paused in admiration. The Comanches were a cruel people. But they were a brave people, still fighting the Texas Rangers long after other tribes had surrendered and given up the arrow for the plow.

A Mexican scout of the Rangers rode up. "He won't listen to you," the Mexican said. "I'll talk to him and try to get him to surrender."

The Mexican spoke to the warrior in Comanche. But the savage shook his head proudly, and then drew back his lance. There was pity in the eyes of Sul Ross as the Ranger shot out his brains.

When Ross got back to camp, he found a surprise. A tanned, gaunt young woman was sitting on a blanket by the fire. A baby lay in another pair of blankets in her hands.

The girl lifted her hands pleadingly to the Ranger captain. But it was not her hands that moved him. It was her eyes.

"Tom," he said excitedly to Ranger Lieutenant Thomas Kelliher. "I never saw an Indian woman with blue eyes. That girl is Cynthia Ann Parker."

But the woman knew no English, and would answer no questions in Comanche. Sul Ross sent her to a U. S. Army Camp where her uncle identified her as the girl who had been carried away by the Comanches. She remembered her name Cynthia Ann but little else.

Woman Tries to Flee

She made four attempts to escape with her child, Prairie Flower, during her four years with the whites. She longed for her husband, Pietr Nocona, and her half-breed son, Quanah. She was no longer a white woman in spirit but an Indian.

Every time she ran away, Sul Ross was asked to find her. Every time, he answered:

"You find her. I'm sorry I ever did."

Cynthia Ann and Prairie Flower withered and died in the strange houses of the white men. Her son, Quanah Parker, grew up to be the last great chief of the Comanches and the personal friend of both Sul Ross and President Theodore Roosevelt.

Pietr Nocona died peacefully on the Comanche Reservation in Indian Territory, still mourning his lost wife and daughter. Many a writer has mistakenly believed that the Indian killed by Ross in the Pease River battle was Cynthia's husband. But it has been satisfactorily established that the brave was another Comanche fighter. And Quanah Parker would have hardly been the friend of a man who had killed his father.

Sul Ross closed his Ranger career in 1861 at the outbreak of the Civil War. But he was to serve Texas many more years.

He declined a commission in the Union Army offered him by General Winfield Scott, to enlist as a private in the Confederate Army. At twenty-five, he was a Confederate general and fought in a hundred and thirty-five engagements.

During the turbulent Reconstruction period, he served as sheriff of McLennan County, Texas, and smashed the outlaw gangs denned up in the Brazos Bottoms.

Texas elected him Governor in 1886 by one of the biggest majorities ever given any man. He held the governor's office, four years, then became president of Texas A & M College where he served until his death at the age of sixty in 1898.

He encouraged the tall Texas boys at A & M to love sports as well as books. His grandson, Sul Ross Harrington, once told me that he loved his football team as much as he had loved his Ranger company.

●

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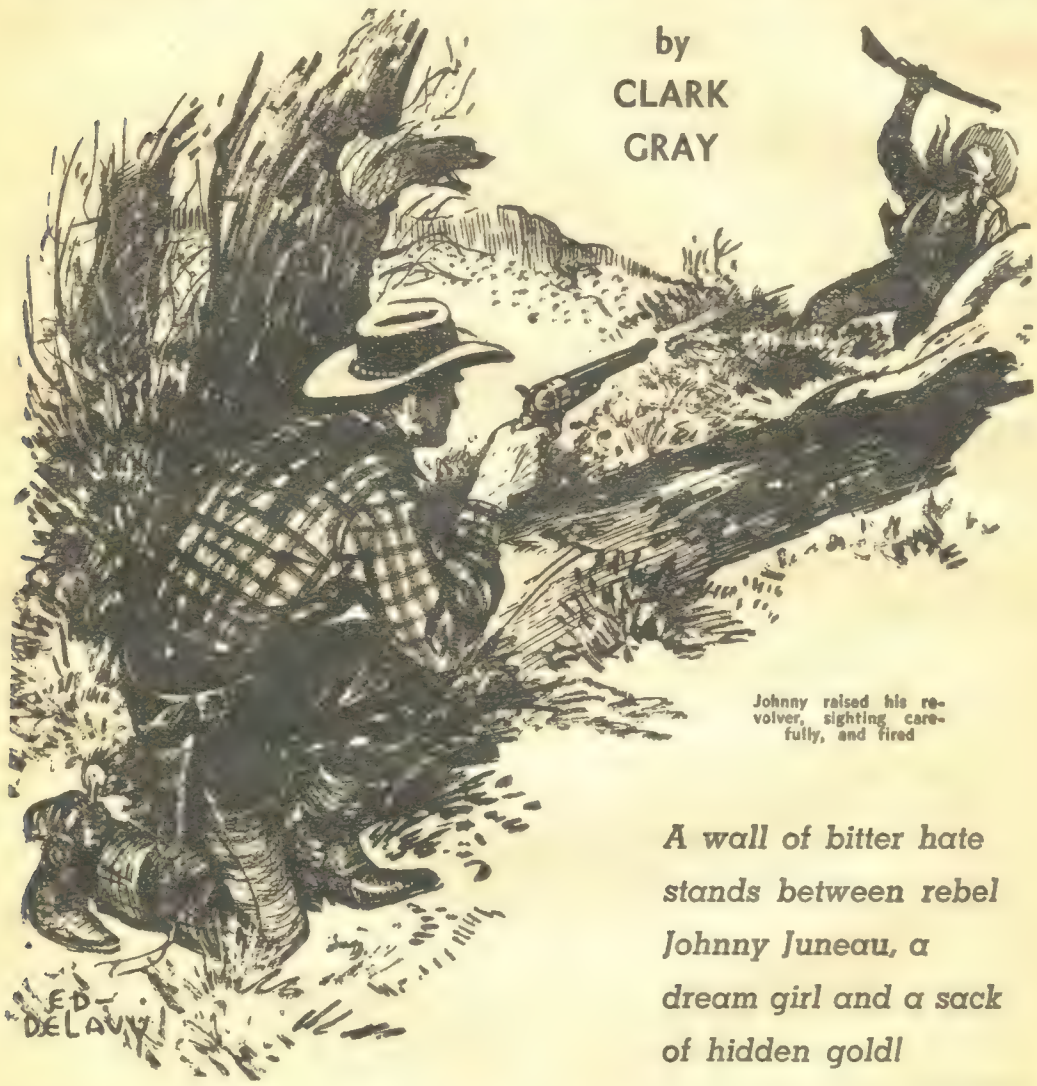

Johnny raised his revolver, sighting carefully, and fired

A wall of bitter hate stands between rebel Johnny Juneau, a dream girl and a sack of hidden gold!

THE rifle shot cracked with a flat snap, slapping echoes back and forth among the cottonwood-covered gorges. It seemed to come at once from everywhere and nowhere. But the bullet that whistled eerily past Johnny Juneau's head to splatter into the red earth of the eroded gully, had a definite origin somewhere to the right.

Johnny Juneau didn't stop to think. He kicked hard at his horse's barrel and left saddle in a sprawling lunge. The hills of south Texas were crawling with derelict, half-starved veterans turned outlaw by the bitterness of a lost war. Such men would kill on sight. He struck the gully floor on all fours and crabbed fractically for the shelter of a clump of buckbrush

as a second shot nicked his worn campaign hat.

In the buckbrush, he halted, feeling his heart slug wildly. He was a wiry, brown-skinned man, wearing his old brushpopper range rig that was too small now, since the Civil War. He flicked his revolver from holster and wriggled deeper into the brush, aware of anger biting savagely.

He had not wanted trouble here. He had come to Texas to forget the war. His somber brown eyes slitted dangerously, and he peered through the brush, studying the cottonwoods that fringed the slopes.

Sunlight slanted through the silvery leaves, dappling the hillside in fawnlike patterns of black and gold. But Johnny detected a darker shadow behind a giant log halfway up the hill. His lips thinned across his teeth.

He raised his revolver, sighting carefully, and fired. One shot was enough for he had been first sergeant of Captain Gordon's famed guerrilla raiders. The dark shadow behind the log thrashed violently, and the man rolled into a patch of sunlight with blood dripping redly from his shoulder. Even at this distance, Johnny could hear high-pitched curses.

Smiling grimly, he got to his feet and approached with a wary running sidestep, using the thick growth of cottonwoods for shelter. All this was an old game to him, a game he had learned to perfection through bitter necessity. Presently he stood over his attacker.

The man wore conventional range garb. A thick, matted beard half concealed hardened features. He was clutching his blood soaked shoulder, staring at Johnny with fear-reddened eyes that held the certainty of death.

The bushwhacker's Sharps rifle still lay behind the log. Johnny picked it up, then quickly fumbled through the stranger's pockets. He found a rusty jackknife, but no other weapons.

"Go ahead," the stranger moaned painfully. "Get this over with."

Johnny Juneau stared. Then he realized that in this stranger's hard code, failure meant death. A slow smile overspread his wiry face. "Rest easy, friend, I never yet killed a man that couldn't fight back. Not even a Yankee."

He saw the hope coming flooding back into the bushwhacker's dark eyes.

"Can yuh ride?" he asked before the man could speak.

SLOWLY the stranger nodded, biting his lip and releasing his wounded shoulder long enough to gesture to a hickory thicket where Johnny now saw a horse patiently cropping grass.

Thoughtfully Johnny stalked into the thicket and led the horse forward, aware of the bushwhacker's dark, bewildered eyes. He was less sure now that this man was a rampaging veteran. The stranger showed no signs of starvation. His clothes were fairly new. He lifted the wounded man to his feet and boosted him into saddle.

"Don't try to git away, brother," Johnny said coldly. "I can shoot pretty straight with this Sharps of yores. Just ride straight ahead—slow an' easy. After we get yuh patched up, you an' me are goin' to talk."

He thought, as they cleared the brow of the hill and turned once more into the winding trail, that this was not exactly the kind of reception he had expected here, after the long ride from his own country—down in the swampy bayous of Louisiana. His brown face twisted in a wry smile.

He had left Louisiana on the invitation of Captain Phil Gordon. Gordon had been his superior during the war, but rank had not touched their friendship. Johnny Juneau still remembered Gordon's handsome, yellow-haired face, lined with worry before the battle at Five Forks.

"Johnny," Gordon had said, slapping his quirt nervously against his gray trousers, "this is going to be a heck of a battle. Maybe we won't either one come out alive, but if we do, you ride out to Texas when the war is over. I own a ranch out there. It's not worth much now, but it will be someday. And I've got enough for us to live on. I've got a sack of gold, Johnny."

"Gold?" Johnny had tried to suppress a start of eagerness. To men who have starved and frozen, gold means more than wealth. It means food, warmth, life. "Gold! I didn't know they wuz gold in Texas."

Phil Gordon had grinned. "My old man went to Californy in '50, Johnny. He brought back all the gold he could carry. He's a queer duck—my old man. Claims he don't want to spend it till a rainy day. Well, Johnny, it'll be a rainy day in Texas when we get there. We'll start from scratch and build the finest ranch north of Mexico." Gordon's voice gentled. "I know you want to go home. But things are going to be bad in your Louisiana country. Bad as can be, even for a wild-haired lobo like you. Come to Texas, Johnny, and if I'm alive I'll give you a decent job, and maybe even find you a Texas girl."

That was three years ago, Johnny thought. He had lived through Five Forks and Appomattox and so had Captain Phil Gordon, although taking a bullet through the knee that left him with a permanent limp. Johnny had gone home and found that Gordon's prophecy was true. Things were hellishly bad in Louisiana.

Johnny's lean face twisted with bitterness when he thought of it. It was a familiar story, he supposed, happening in a thousand places in the South. Farm sold for back taxes. Mother and father dead from starvation and malaria. Fat carpetbaggers infesting the land like disease-ridden rats, spreading graft and corruption. . . .

Johnny Juneau was gripping the saddle horn in a white-knuckled fist, struggling with the bitter memories of a lost war and a dishonorable peace, when the white ranchhouse came into view. He leaned forward in saddle then, relaxing, studying the place with eyes sharpened by Gordon's description.

It was exactly as Gordon had said. The tall, two-storied house with a veranda running around three sides. The whispering cottonwoods just inside the white picket fence. The huge lilac beside the open front door. Johnny felt excitement speed his heartbeat.

Ahead of him on the trail, the bushwhacker turned painfully in saddle. The bushwhacker's face above his beard was drawn and white with pain.

"We goin' there?" the bushwhacker croaked.

Johnny nodded. "Straight up to the house, brother. Then I'll have a look at that shoulder."

He saw the bushwhacker sway drunkenly. Evidently the man was weakening from loss of blood. Johnny felt a twinge of pity, but he reflected the stranger had tried to kill him. A little pain might be a good tongue-loosener.

Approaching the house, Johnny glimpsed two figures standing on the wide, shaded porch. One was a girl, he saw, and he grinned. He followed the bushwhacker through the gate, the horses' hoofs moving almost soundlessly in the thick dust. He halted at the hitch-rail before the porch, looking at the two, who were conversing animatedly.

The man on the porch had black eyes. Cruel eyes, Johnny thought, that seemed to pinch inward. He wore moccasins and a red Spanish sash, and he was burly, with arms that hung down like a gorilla's.

"I rode west," the man was saying gruffly, "and I didn't find a track less than two weeks old. I'll try south tomorrer."

A CLIPPED something about the man's speech jarred on Johnny's ear, but before he could place it the girl swung round with a strangled cry and pointed into the yard.

"Mike," she shrilled. "M-Mike's hurt!"

Johnny turned and saw that the bushwhacker had fallen from saddle. He lay in the thick dust with blood oozing from his shirt. Johnny swung from saddle, then and bent over the stranger. The man had fainted.

Johnny cursed softly. Gritting his teeth, he got his arms under the man's shoulders and picked him up. He looked at the girl.

"Where can I put him?"

"In—in the house." She had paled, but she was biting her lip to regain her control. "Hank, get the bandages from the bunkhouse."

The man called Hank growled something and strode around the corner of the house. Johnny moved up the porch steps, staggering a little under the heavy weight of the bushwhacker. Inside the house, he laid the man on a sofa and tore open his shirt. Grim-faced, he was examining the purplish wound when the girl returned with hot water and clean rags.

He heard her draw in a swift breath at

sight of the wound, and he took the rags from her and went to work. He had gained a rough and ready experience with gunshot wounds during the war. As he probed for the bullet he was aware of the girl hovering anxiously beside him.

"His name's Mike?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said, and he noted that her voice had that same clipped quality. "He works here, for my cousin, Phil Gordon. Where did you find him?"

"Gordon! Your cousin?" He stared at her, noticing for the first time the yellow hair, her pale blue eyes, and the delicate cast of feature. She had a strong resemblance to Phil Gordon. Where Gordon was handsome, she had a lissome beauty. Johnny felt a sudden lurch of eagerness, remembering Phil Gordon's words before that last battle.

"If I'm alive," Phil Gordon had said, "I'll even find you a Texas girl."

Johnny ducked his head, then, and drew the bullet from the shoulder of the man called Mike. He dressed the wound with bandages brought by the sullen Hank from the bunkhouse. As he finished, a tint of color flushed Mike's cheeks, and he opened bleary eyes.

Johnny straightened, smiling with grim satisfaction. He turned and saw Hank and the girl watching him.

He shifted on his feet, carefully studying the two, impelled by some strange undercurrent of warning. Hank's sullen black eyes slitted with narrow cunning, while the girl stared at him with frank curiosity. Without speaking, Johnny took brown-paper makings from his pocket and fashioned a cigarette. During the war, he had learned to sense trouble. He sensed it now, twisting his midriff into hard knots. "Where," he gritted, "is Phil?"

Sudden tears came to the girl's blue eyes, and she turned her head quickly. When she spoke, her voice grated in a dry sob. "We—we don't know. Who are you? Phil's gone."

"Gone?" Johnny Juneau took one step forward and touched her shoulder. He shook her gently, feeling his suspicion ripen to certainty. "What happened?" he asked gruffly. "Is he dead?"

"Easy, buddy," the man called Hank said. "Don't get excited over nothing. Phil rode out of here two days ago, and he didn't come back. We don't know where he is."

Johnny Juneau stepped away from the girl, remembering then the things Phil had said. There was that sack of gold. For the first time, Johnny began to see a possible reason behind the bushwhack attempt. He turned savagely, sensing the wounded Mike staring at him from the sofa.

Mike's eyes were dark, fear-struck. Johnny crossed the room and grabbed Mike roughly by the shirt.

"Why did yuh shoot at me?" he snapped.

He heard the girl's shrill cry of surprise, but he ignored it. He shook Mike till the man cried out in pain.

"Why did yuh shoot at me, blast yuh," Johnny snarled. "Talk, or I'll—"

"I'll talk," Mike whimpered. "L-let go my shirt. I thought you was an owl-hooter. The hills are full of outlaws, an' I thought you was one of 'em. Honest, I didn't know—"

"Like blazes!" Johnny dropped Mike's shirt. He spun on Hank, the red-sashed foreman. "Turn 'im over to the sheriff. I'll swear he tried to kill me."

Hank grinned, his black, beady eyes glittering. "There isn't any law in this country, stranger. If you want him punished, do it yourself."

GRIMLY Johnny stared at the foreman, mulling this over. He had no desire to kill Mike. He only wanted to find out the truth, to locate Phil Gordon if possible. He grunted and swung toward the girl.

"Where did Phil say he was headin', when he left, ma'am?"

"I—I—" she shrugged hopelessly. "It's a long story. But if you're a friend of Phil's—"

Wryly he grinned. "Yeah. I fergot to introduce myself, formal like. My name is Johnny Juneau. I was his sergeant during the war."

"Johnny Juneau!" A smile lit her face, bringing a bright, glad light to her blue eyes. "Johnny Juneau! Of course! He's spoken of you so many times! Oh, I'm so glad you're here." Her smile vanished, and she straightened, a faint flush of self-consciousness on her cheeks. "But I—I've been an awful hostess. Hank, go put

up Johnny's horse. I'll finish off the supper."

An hour later, Johnny pushed aside his plate, sighing contentedly. He had not eaten a meal like this since before the war. He grinned at the girl, whose name, she had said, was Martha. Martha Gordon. He lit a cigarette and studied her yellow hair, and the delicate, upturned lips. She was as much like Phil as she could be, he thought.

"Tell me now," he said, "about Phil."

She had changed into a cotton house dress while Hank was carrying the wounded Mike to the bunkhouse. She wore a flowered apron, and her face was flushed pink with heat from the wood cookstove.

"Why," she dropped her hands to the table, "there isn't much to tell. You see, Phil's father brought back a sack of gold from California."

"Yeah." He lit a cigarette. "He told me about it."

"Oh! Well, Phil is the only one who knows where the gold is, since his father died last year. We think somebody kidnapped him to try to make him tell."

Under his anxiety for Phil, Johnny was conscious of a strange beauty in this girl who sat opposite him at the table. Her hands, for instance, playing worriedly with a fork. The fingers were long, slender, and a spattering of freckles dotted the bridge of the knuckles. It was a sensible hand, he thought. The kind of hand that could cook, sew, maybe even rock a cradle.

Johnny was aware with a wry humor that he could easily make a fool of himself over Martha Gordon. He wondered if Phil had been thinking of Martha when he mentioned that Texas girl.

The kitchen door swung open then and a stranger stepped inside. A thin, yellow-haired stranger who looked something like Phil Gordon. But it wasn't Phil, Johnny saw after the first start of surprise. Martha jumped up with a glad smile.

"Hello, Donald. Johnny, this is my brother, Donald Gordon."

Johnny got to his feet, aware of a strange uneasiness, wondering suddenly why Phil had never mentioned these cousins. He rounded the table and shook hands with Donald Gordon.

"Glad to know you, Juneau," Donald said curtly. "Phil spoke highly of you. If he were only here now—"

"Did you have any luck in town, Donald?" Martha asked anxiously.

"None!" Donald's thin lips curled as he carefully knocked dust from his trousers. "Hank was right—there is no law in Texas. It's shameful. That sheriff laughed at me when I suggested coming out here. Shameful! They wouldn't allow this at home. Not in Boston!"

Johnny Juneau jerked as if a hornet had stung him. He swung 'round and stared at Donald Gordon, feeling blood slam his temples.

"Boston! Did you say Boston?"

"Why, yes." Donald Gordon looked up in mild surprise. "Boston is our home. What of it?"

Johnny Juneau dropped into a chair, feeling his surprise fade before anger that hurtled through him like a Gulf Coast thunderstorm. So they were Yankees! He ground his fingernails into his palms. This explained that clipped accent that had sounded strange on the lips of Martha and the foreman, Hank. Yankees!

Johnny Juneau had not fought four bloody years of war against Yankees without learning to hate them. He had killed them. He had seen them kill his buddies. Phil Gordon carried an enemy bullet in his knee.

And his own mother and father had died, weakened from starvation caused by the blockade. His own farm was in the hands of a carpetbagger.

Johnny Juneau dropped his head in his hands. The war was over, he told himself savagely. The killing of Yankees was finished, and his bitterness should die with it. But Johnny knew that no man can forget a hatred overnight. He straightened, finally, knowing that his own face was pale and drawn. Knowing, too, what he would have to do now.

"I'm sorry," he grunted. "I didn't know you were Yank—uh—New Englanders."

JOHNNY JUNEAU started heavily toward the door. But Martha Gordon read his thoughts and intercepted him, her blue eyes soft.

"Wait, Johnny!" She stood before him, face anxious, her yellow hair glittering

in a slanting beam of sunlight. "Wait, Johnny. Of course we're Yankees. But we're Phil Gordon's cousins. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

He shook his head, feeling his own stubborn anger block the tenderness he had felt for her. "Not much," he gritted.

"But Phil's in trouble," she pleaded. "Please, Johnny! Stay here till we find Phil! We need you to help us. When we find Phil, then you can leave if—if you want. But we need you now. Phil needs you." . . .

He hunkered in the lee of the big white house, staring across the white picket fence at the sun dropping behind the cottonwood covered hills. He snubbed out his cigarette against his boot-heel and pulled his Stetson further down across his eyes.

He would not have stayed, he told himself savagely, except for Phil. Phil was in trouble, she had said. And Johnny Juneau was not the man to leave his old captain in a whipsaw.

For Phil was being whipsawed, Johnny reflected. The answer to Phil's disappearance lay somewhere between Martha and Donald Gordon on one side, and big burly Hank, the foreman, on the other. Between three Yankees. Johnny closed his eyes and argued with himself that any of the three could be after Phil's gold. Any of the three. Or all of them.

Presently he got to his feet. Bluish dusk was settling now over the horse corrals behind the house. He stalked across the deep dust of the yard and entered the bunkhouse, thinking that he still hadn't finished with the bushwhacker, Mike.

The bunkhouse was dark. Johnny stood in the doorway and fumbled for a match. By its guttering light he located a lantern hanging from a nail on the wall. He lit it and peered into the empty bunks till he found Mike.

Mike lay with his good hand across his eyes, snoring softly. Johnny put his hand on Mike's knee and shook it. "Mike," he whispered. "Wake up."

Mike rolled a little in his sleep, and opened his dark eyes. He tensed, then relaxed with a tired smile. "Howdy, Mister. I figgered you'd be here before this."

Johnny Juneau hunkered forward, aware of a thin excitement threading through him. Knowing he had to gain this man's confidence, he grinned cheerfully.

"Mike, what have these damn Yankees got you into?"

Mike's dark face sagged with weariness. "I'll tell yuh, Mister, because yore a right hombre. Yuh could have killed me, an' yuh didn't. When I shot at yuh, I only aimed to scare yuh away. I was holdin' Phil Gordon a prisoner. He's in a cabin up in them hills. I was promised part of his gold. I—"

The gunshot cracked like a whipshot just outside the bunkhouse, shattering the glass window and passing Johnny Juneau's shoulder like a flicker of death. Concussion rang in Johnny's ears, and instinctively he rolled sideward, not knowing what had happened. Swinging a booted foot, he kicked the lantern against the floor, smashing it. In the darkness, he lay quiet, heart thudding.

Then he heard Mike's strangled cough, and he understood. Lunging to his feet, he made the bunkhouse door in two swift strides. He had his gun in his hand as he plunged through the door, but he didn't need it. The figure that faded into the dusk of the horse corrals was already too far off.

A flash of color gleamed from the figure's waist. Red, Johnny thought, and he remembered Hank's red sash. But he might be mistaken, he knew. Colors changed in twilight. Cursing savagely, he turned back into the bunkhouse and struck another match.

IT WAS easy to see that the bullet had entered the side of Mike's head, just above the ear. In his death throes, Mike had fallen half off the bunk, till he lay with his forehead touching the floor.

Johnny Juneau blew out the match. He stood in the middle of the darkened bunkhouse, grinding fingernails into his palms, feeling once again the old bitter futility of this. The old bitterness that had plagued him through the war. The hatred of killing. The hatred of the black things in men that made them kill.

Gently he lifted Mike into the bunk. He found a blanket and placed it over the dead man's face. He left the bunkhouse, his lips thin and taut against the whiteness of his teeth, and strode grimly toward

the horsebarn.

He found the eroded gully, deep in the cottonwood gorges, about an hour later. The moon had risen, a pale, sickly moon that threw a ghostly light into the hills, distorting shadows into darkly forbidding shapes. This was the place where Mike had shot at him.

He sat on his horse quietly an instant, getting his bearings. He remembered that the shot had come from his right. That meant the cabin in which Phil Gordon was held would be in that direction.

He touched his heels to the horse's barrel. Then, urged by an unreasoning desire for haste, he swung in wide half circles, zig-zagging across the gorges in a fast walk that ate up distance. His brown eyes peered into the shadows, alert for the danger he felt twisting knots inside him.

He found the cabin in a half hour. The moon had slid behind a bank of scudding white clouds. It lay well hidden in a dimple in the hills, a dilapidated, slab-sided affair with a door that gaped wide on rusty hinges. He tied his horse and crept forward on foot, his six-gun between white-knuckled fingers.

This could be a trap, he told himself. If Mike's killer had heard enough—"

At the rickety porch he halted, listening, probing the shadows of the rustling cottonwoods. He heard nothing. The cabin was dark, silent as a graveyard.

Moving quickly then, with the guerrilla skill he had learned in the war, he leaped across the porch toward the open door. His foot struck the porch floor once, sending a startling creak squalling through the night. Then he was inside, immersed in blackness.

He breathed softly, "Phil?"

"Here," Phil Gordon croaked. "Who is it?"

Johnny stumbled toward the sound. Bending, he found Phil Gordon on the floor, bound hand and foot. He grinned tightly and fumbled for his knife.

"It's Johnny. Be quiet. I think they followed me."

"Thank God!" Phil's sigh gusted through the darkness. "I prayed you'd come."

Johnny didn't answer. He was working swiftly in the blackness, slashing Phil Gordon's ropes. He helped Phil to his feet, feeling the bones beneath the thin flesh of his old captain's arm. Phil was half-starved he thought. Gently Johnny helped him toward the door.

On the porch, he glimpsed Phil's face in the flickering moonlight. Phil's eyes seemed sunken into his head. His cheekbones ridged his pale face with gray.

"Listen, Johnny," Phil croaked painfully, swaying with weakness. "They—they been starvin' me. Tryin' to make me tell where the gold is hidden. I want you to know, in case something happens. It's in the fireplace, Johnny. Under a brick in the—"

"Wait!" Johnny hissed, putting a sharp hand on Phil's shoulder. "Listen!"

He had heard a rustling in the brush around the cabin. Grim-jawed, he drew his gun and that instant an orange flash blazed, and the crack of a gun boomed through the night. Johnny was aware Phil Gordon stumbled backwards against the cabin wall, and then he was shooting savagely at that gunflash, his revolver bucking in his hand. He heard a hoarse scream of fright. Something thrashed heavily, then running hoofbeats clattered down the hillside.

Johnny Juneau holstered and turned in time to catch Phil Gordon as he fell. A sickness lurched in his stomach as he glimpsed the blood spurting from Phil Gordon's pain-wracked mouth.

"Johnny," Phil Gordon gurgled. "Martha—my cousin—I—"

BACK in the doctor's house in town, where Johnny had managed to carry his sorely wounded friend, the white-haired old medico shook his head as he shut the sick room door. His weathered face creased in a thoughtful frown, and when he looked up, Johnny saw his answer in his eyes.

"Not much chance," the medico said glumly. "You did a good first-aid job, son, but the bullet touched the lung. I'd say he'll die before morning."

Johnny Juneau felt his own fingernails biting his palms, felt his face freeze into rigid lumps. He swallowed hard, thinking of the war, of the cold rations and dirty blankets he had shared with Phil Gordon. Of the sweat, the danger. And of the hate for Yankees. His voice was a hollow rasp.

"No chance at all, eh, Doc?"

The Doc shrugged angrily. "Blue blazes, son, I ain't God! Of course, there's a chance! He's a strong man, even if he has been half starved. But with a wound like that—not one in a hundred would live. If he isn't dead by morning, well, then we'll talk about chances."

"All right, I'll bring in his cousins from the ranch." Johnny turned toward the door, then halted. Even yet, he thought, there might be danger.

"Doc," he grunted. "Whoever shot him may try again. Watch 'im, will yuh?"

The old medico swore. "Get out of here, son! Of course I'll watch 'im. I brought Phil Gordon into this world. If he goes out of it, it won't be because I fell down on the job."

The trail back to the ranch lay ghost-like, a white ribbon of dust through the cottonwoods. Johnny rode at a slow jog-trot, not wanting to force the horse after its exertions in carrying Phil to town. Besides, he reflected bitterly, there was no hurry now.

The idea that Phil Gordon was going to die forced a strange sense of unreality on him. He could not believe it, somehow. Yet Johnny had seen too many good men die in battle to doubt for an instant the medico's words. Yes, he told himself, Phil was going to die. And all because somebody was greedy for gold. Donald Gordon, or Martha Gordon, or Hank. Three Yankees. Any of them. Or all of them.

The thought of taking the gold for himself drifted across his mind then, like a vagrant wisp of cool air. Why not? he thought. He sat bold upright in the saddle, biting his lip.

Why not? Why not steal the gold himself, to circumvent these thieves? He was Phil Gordon's friend, and they were not. Three years ago, they would have killed Phil across a battle line.

Johnny Juneau clenched the saddlehorn with taut fingers and felt sweat bead his forehead. With the gold, he could buy back his farm in Louisiana from the carpetbagger. It would be easy to take it. After Phil died, no one would ever know.

He was still bleakly clenching the saddlehorn, his face twisted into savage granite, when he rode into the ranch yard and dropped rein over the hitch-rail. Lights shone through the parlor windows, and as he mounted the wide porch he saw figures inside. He halted an instant, lips curled bitterly against his teeth as he watched.

Donald and Martha Gordon stood before the empty brick fireplace, facing Hank. Hank was talking, his black eyes glittering as he smashed his fist into his palm.

Birds of a feather, Johnny thought grimly. And he strode across the porch and shoved into the room without knocking. Martha Gordon lifted her yellow curls and stared at him, blue eyes wide. He sensed the steel-spring tension between Hank and Donald Gordon, but he ignored it.

"Phil got shot," he announced grimly. "He's at the medico's house in town. The doc says he won't live till morning."

UNSTEADILY, Johnny Juneau stood in the doorway, watching the three riders turn into the trail toward town. Martha Gordon had taken the news well, he thought. She had choked back her tears and prepared wordlessly to ride. Hank had given Johnny a black look that might have meant anything or nothing, and the three had saddled and ridden out.

Johnny waited until the three vanished from sight in the wavering trail-shadows, then he turned grimly toward the brick fireplace. He dropped to his knees and fumbled among the soot-covered bricks.

Phil had said, "The gold is in the fireplace, Johnny. Under a brick—"

Ten minutes later he found the loose brick and drew it aside. Underneath, he saw the rotted brown paper sack, with yellow metal gleaming through. He felt no excitement at this moment. Only a queer, gnawing guilt. He pulled loose the remains of the paper sack, shedding brilliant gold nuggets on the blackened bricks.

He had no idea of the value of these nuggets. He had never seen raw gold before. But they were worth enough to buy a farm in Louisiana, he knew. Grim-faced, he glanced around the room, searching for something to carry the gold. He found a table-cloth on the reading table in the corner. He removed it, wrapped the gold.

When he straightened, with the gold

bulging in the cloth, he saw Hank, the foreman, grinning at him from the doorway.

"Thanks, brother," Hank said, "for collecting my gold. I worked hard enough to get it."

Johnny Juneau back-stepped against the empty fireplace, feeling blood drain from his face. His heart began to pound in his chest, and he knew suddenly that Hank must have back-tracked. Hank must have heard Phil telling him about the hiding place. That meant that Hank must have shot Phil while aiming at him, Johnny.

Hank, too, must have been the man who killed Mike to shut his mouth. And now, Johnny saw with a rising lump of terror in his throat, Hank held a Colt's .44 in his big fist. As Johnny watched, Hank eared the hammer. It rode back against the frame with a rasp that was like a pitcher of icewater down Johnny's spine.

Johnny blinked and lunged, then, with the war-born instinct of a guerrilla to fight back, no matter what the odds. Dropping sideward, he slung the gold nuggets with an overhand motion straight at Hank. The backward force of the throw twisted him to the floor, but as he rolled he saw the gold catch Hank's shoulder, slamming him against the door-jamb.

Desperately Johnny flicked out his six-gun and dropped his elbow to the floor and fired, belly-flat. It was a snap shot, but a good one. Dust kicked from Hank's red sash. The foreman's hands lifted, and his Colt's .44 skidded across the room. A surprised look flitted across Hank's face as he pitched forward. When he hit the floor, he didn't move.

The first bluish fingers of dawn had tinted the east before Johnny halted at the medico's house and strode to the door. The gold made a heavy drag on his tired shoulders.

He knocked softly, and the door swung open to reveal Martha Gordon's yellow-framed face. Her eyes were red-rimmed from sleeplessness, but a smile quirked her mouth.

"Hello, Johnny," she whispered, laying a finger on her lips. "Phil is sleeping."

He thought vaguely that he had never seen a finer sight than this girl, with her gentle smile, standing in the first blue light of morning. But he was tired, he told himself. Tired, and all wrong about a lot of things.

He held out the gold.

"Here," he croaked. "Take this. It's yores, if Phil don't live."

"But he will live," she whispered, her blue eyes shining. "The doctor said he has the strongest constitution he's ever seen. Phil will live, Johnny. And you saved him."

He rubbed a hand across his eyes, letting it settle through his mind, taking in her meaning bit by bit. He had wanted so hard to believe that Phil would live that somehow he could not accept it now. It was like a gift, he thought. A gift that he did not deserve. He blinked hard, feeling the sudden swell of gratitude surging through him, scarcely aware that she was still talking.

"Hank tried to turn us against you," she was whispering. "That's what he and Donald were arguing about when you came in tonight. And Johnny, Phil never told you about us, because his parents came from Boston, and he went to school there for twelve years. Yet Phil is a Yankee, Johnny."

He stood there on the porch, blinking at her. So Phil was a Yankee, too! Suddenly he saw his old hatred slip away. He saw, then, that he had been blinded by the war. He was only now waking up. But there was plenty of time, he thought.

Phil would live, and Martha would stay in Texas. Somehow he was sure of that. He reached out and took her hand, the slender hand with the sprinkle of freckles across the knuckles. He remembered how he had thought her hands could cook, sew, or even rock a cradle.

And he remembered those words of Phil's before the Battle of Five Forks.

"If I'm alive," Phil had said, "I'll even find you a Texas girl."

Well, Johnny thought with a silent grin, Phil was alive. And even if she did come from Boston, Martha Gordon was in Texas now.

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The doctor's horse was pitching when Walt's hands closed about Kistler's leg

Nurse's Big Call

By CLEE WOODS

Wanda Milbourne, assistant to a range doctor, faces a stern test when nester folks need quick medical help!

THAT insistent knock on the door frightened nurse Wanda Milbourne. She got to her feet and stood there, uncertain. A slender girl in an orange dress, Wanda had such gorgeous black eyes and black hair and such fair skin that it was a wonder she hadn't married some intern before she finished her training three months ago.

After graduation, she had come to this Idaho county seat to work in young Dr. Kistler's office, and now she was engaged to him. Only two nights ago she had finally let him take her in his arms,

and she had nodded when he implored her to marry him next week.

Again came that knock on the door, impatient now. She moved over, held out her hand for the knob, then paused. Dr. Kistler never knocked like that. His knock was easy, with some of his wooing in it. Nobody else ever came to her little two-room log cabin on the edge of town.

"Miss Milbourne," a deep, vibrant voice came through the door, "this is Walt Arrowhill. I've come to get you on some mighty needy cases."

She opened the door. The young rancher's rugged, square-set face was so tanned it blended with the moonlight night behind it. He was rangy, somewhat on the slim side.

"How can so young a man be so lonely in his heart?" was her first swift thought.

That was the way he looked, aloof and lonely and tormented by a deep inward hunger. Yet he couldn't have been more than twenty-four. He stepped upon the threshold, as if too proud to be kept standing outside in the shadows.

He had a sure, lithe feel in his step and Wanda heard the soft tinkle of his spurs. There was a bit of dash in the red neckerchief about his throat, and there was quality in his plaid wool shirt and gray whipcord riding breeches.

The nurse's eyes flitted to the Colt on his right hip. That gun hung there so easy and low, as if just waiting handy to a long arm.

Wanda had heard about this Walt Arrowhill, the last of four brothers. The whelp of an old range lion who six years ago had been shot down in the darkness not two blocks from here. Nobody ever had been tried for the murder, but all northern Idaho knew the old man had been ambushed by some "little rancher" from Blackfoot Hole.

"Over in Blackfoot Hole they've tried for days to get a doctor for old lady Marsh and the little Turner girl," Walt said. "Now an epidemic of fever's broke out—four families hit hard inside of five days, after a big picnic at Spring Grove two weeks ago. Bad water."

"I'm so sorry," Wanda said. "Wish I could help, but I don't go out on cases. You see, I work in Dr. Kistler's office."

"But these people are in desperate need!" Walt insisted.

"But Dr. Kistler is the only doctor for this town of three thousand," insisted Wanda, "with several hundred more people on ranches and in little towns nearby. It's more practice than he can take care of. Besides, the Blackfoot Hole people don't pay their doctor bills."

The rancher took a step nearer her. His big right hand clamped onto her shoulder. An angry light whipped into his blue eyes below their craggy brows.

"You're a nurse, aren't you?" he fired at her.

"Yes."

"And a nurse is trained to be a person of mercy. But you just sit in an office in daytime and wait for patients with money to come in—when other people are dying!"

He made his words burn and sting. But he was hasty, unfair! Her heart went out to all sick people. She yearned to help every patient she ever cared for. Maybe she had let the establishd routine of a doctor's office make herself sound unsympathetic, but she knew in her heart that she wasn't.

She would never admit to this man her mistake of sounding routine and cold, though! Not to this highhanded ranny! Nevertheless, she felt her face flaming hot. She never had been so humiliated in all her life, nor so angry.

Another barrage was leaping from his lips.

"I've almost begged Dr. Kistler to go, but he won't stir. Claims he's too busy here. But it's that little item of pay, too, I think. What if the Blackfoot people didn't pay? There are children sick over there, and an old woman!"

"But you forget the sick here in Beaver City," Wanda argued. "It'd take a day for one visit to Blackfoot Hole, with the spring mud like it is."

"Any serious sickness in town now?" Walt demanded.

"Not too serious," she had to admit.

"Then let them wait!" he snapped. "I tell you people're dyin' over there! All because the road's muddy and they haven't paid. Heaven help us!"

He strode off into the darkness. Back to her every jingle of his spurs said, "Shame! Shame! Shame!"

She slammed the door shut, tried to shake off his stinging indictment. It was unjust, far too exaggerated anyway. If he hadn't been so impatient, so unwilling to tolerate her defense, she would be getting ready to go with him right now.

Why had young Arrowhill come after a doctor for neighbors who hated him anyway? The Arrowhills had been pitted against the so-called "little ranchers," as folks here called those Blackfoot Hole nesters for a generation. The little ranchers had nothing to do with the big K Pothook spread, which today belonged solely to Walt Arrowhill.

Wanda walked from window to mantel, back again, and again. She sat down and picked up a book. She couldn't read. At last she took off her clothes, picked up pajamas, stood holding them a moment, wholly unconscious of the beautiful perfection in every line of her slender body.

SUDDENLY she threw the pajamas down and began putting on her clothes again. The burning words of that young cowman had made her doubt, suddenly and alarmingly, whether she really loved Dr. Ed Kistler. He was so downright handsome and so persistent a lover that . . . Well, some things had to be thrashed out tonight.

She buttoned up the chic orange dress that set off her black eyes and hair so well, dabbed on some powder and went to the telephone which Dr. Kistler had had installed so she would always be on call. But he didn't answer her ring.

It was only a minute, though, before Dr. Kistler himself was at her door. He was a big man, and a regular blond Apollo. His gray suit had been tailored to the last stitch. But in spite of his sartorial perfection he looked worried, really upset. "There's something in the wind, Wanda," he said shortly. "May I come in?"

"Yes, of course, Doctor."

He closed the door and started to take her into his arms, but she stepped back.

"What is it?" she asked.

"There's a lot of sickness in Blackfoot Hole," he said. "Walt Arrowhill seems to think I'm the man to shoulder it off onto, but you can see that I just can't leave all my patients. I do so wish—"

He stopped. Outside there was a jingle of spurs. Then that imperative knock on her door again. Wanda flung the door open. Somehow she had let Walt Arrowhill get away with a lot before, but she wasn't going to now.

"Easy," Dr. Kistler said. "He's not too much to blame."

"Back to do some more lecturing, Mr. Arrowhill?" Wanda greeted the visitor, with heavy sarcasm. "How about letting me ask you about the lives you've helped to snuff out—for greed of grass? Let's see, how many men do they say the Arrowhills and their hired gunslingers have killed in the past twenty years? Nine or ten? And you killed two of them, didn't you?"

She stopped short, for lack of breath. And for shame. Because she saw how hard her words had hit him. It was in his eyes. Utter remorse. She knew that instant that he had been haunted by the killings in which he had participated. One man down before his gun last year, and a second only weeks ago.

"They forced it on me both times," he said, and suddenly he was humble, deeply hurt. "In fact, I backed off from each man once, and let him brag he'd made me eat crow."

Oddly, Wanda wanted to believe him. But her sympathy went to him only momentarily. Then his hand was on his gun and he brought it leaping out onto Dr. Kistler. A gasp died in Wanda's throat.

"Dr. Kistler," Walt was saying, "you're going with me to the Hole. I'll take you to your office, let you get what you'll need for fever for nine people, more to come, and for old lady Marsh and the little Turner girl."

Wanda was amazed at her sudden courage. That gun was not scaring her now. For in her heart, she knew Walt Arrowhill was not a man who wanted to kill, or who would pull a trigger in excitement.

"Pay no attention to him, Doctor!" she said quickly. "That gun's only a bluff. He won't shoot!"

Dr. Kistler was quick to grasp her meaning. A man would hardly shoot a doctor for refusing to go see sick neighbors. Kistler had played tackle in college and he was still young enough to feel the brawn of his two hundred and ten pounds. He had to be given credit, too, for a certain reckless courage. Besides, Arrowhill was too imperative.

"Cowboy," Dr. Kistler said, "I'm taking that gun from you, and I don't think you'll be fool enough to wrap a noose around your neck by shooting me."

Kistler flashed Wanda a look, to see how she took that bit of daring. Then he suddenly dived at Walt and grabbed for the rancher's gun hand. He had good right to think he could take the weapon from a man weighing thirty-five pounds less than he did.

But he just didn't know Walt Arrowhill. The cowboy stepped back from his lunge.

"So you want to make it man to man, huh?" he said.

Walt dropped his six-shooter. Dr. Kistler promptly shot a big fist for Walt's jaw. Walt's head bobbed sidewards and the doctor was thrown off balance when his fist only fanned thin air. Then Walt let him have it right on the jaw. A right, a left. Then a swift uppercut that jerked the doctor's head back and sagged his knees. Kistler only pawed the air weakly with another fist, and Walt dropped him cold.

He had hardly hit the floor when Walt seized him beneath the arms and started dragging him out the door.

"He'll wake up somewhere on the road," Walt said to the nurse. "Get in the station wagon with us and we'll stop at his office for his saddle-bags and whatever else you think a doctor and nurse'll need over there."

"I'll do no such thing!" the girl said defiantly. "I'm going straight to the sheriff!"

"Try it, if you like," Walt invited. "Sheriff Blanchard happens to be an old friend of us Arrowhills. I told him what I had in mind, and he said it was just the medicine Doc Kistler needed to make him useful in this cow country."

"So that's why you can lord it over all the little ranchers in the basin, is it?" Wanda hurled at him. "You've got the sheriff bought off!"

Walt's shoulders lifted in a careless shrug. "No," he said. "He's just a fair-minded man dishing out justice without too much red tape. Come on! Somebody may die over in the basin while you're standing here arguing with me."

He half-carried, half-dragged the big doctor out. Wanda stood in the door, peering after them. But she hardly saw the two forms by the station wagon. Those sick people were first in her heart now.

What a strange man, Walt Arrowhill. He made her want to get into his station wagon and hasten to the fever-ridden ranch people, in spite of the way she hated him for his highhandedness. He had a mastery about him, and she was afraid of him all the more as the full strength of him gripped her.

He had Dr. Kistler loaded into the station wagon now. He was coming back. Suddenly panic seized the nurse. She wanted to slam the door and lock it. But that would make her out just a frightened woman, and she knew she had to be more than that in his presence. He stirred rebellion in her, even against her will.

"Coming with us?" he demanded.

"No, I'm not!" she again defied him. The words almost choked her.

She knew that he was going to do it, but a quick gasp broke from her when his hands reached out for her. Again she wanted to run, would have run, but she was frozen with fear of him.

His arms went about her, gripped her hard. He lifted her off the floor. She felt the iron of his body as he held her and blew out the lamp. Then he was carrying her down the walk as though she were only a small girl.

She could see his face above her only in dark silhouette. It was like the rugged outline of Idaho rim-rock in the night, not the chiseled smooth perfection of Ed Kistler's features.

He reached the station wagon with her and stopped, as if reluctant to let her go from his arms. Nobody had seen these strange goings-on, apparently, be-

cause it was night, and Wanda Milbourne's nearest neighbor was half a block away. She knew that she could scream suddenly and stir up excitement, but Walt could whirr the station wagon away before any help could reach her.

"You know, Wanda," he was saying, "I'm going to tell you something. Maybe it's funny to you, but you're the first girl I ever held in my arms—and I'm all throbby inside. Aren't you?"

All at once Wanda knew that never again was she going to be afraid of Walt Arrowhill. So much a man, and yet so like a mere boy talking to his schoolgirl sweetheart.

"Yes, I am," she said, before she could stop herself. Her answer alarmed her, and she instantly tried to cover up. "But I've never been kidnaped before, you see."

HIS ARMS gripped her tighter and he smiled down at her. "You know," he said, "I'd be in love with you right now if you hadn't refused to go see sick people so bad in need of you."

That made her mad again. "Don't try too hard to forget my refusal," she said, with a little sting in each word. "If you'll let me, I'll go on from here without trouble. I've wanted to go, all along, but . . . I'll get up on the seat by myself."

He put her down and she climbed to the seat. He threw a tarp over Dr. Kistler, got up beside Wanda and drove away. They stopped at his office and she went in for supplies. Walt didn't offer to go in and keep watch over her, didn't even warn her not to try to escape from him. Now he knew this girl's heart was in the right place.

"He knows I'll go—like a darn fool," she thought. "And I'd give his whole ranch if I hadn't let him make me think he's right in shaming me and Ed for not going!"

It was late spring and the mountain road was rutted and muddy. Sometimes they crept along in low gear; often they stalled on the worst spots. By midnight Wanda's back was tired from the long ride, and there was a chill in the air of the nine-thousand-foot pass. Walt dug an old slicker from somewhere behind and threw it around her.

He shook Dr. Kistler and Wanda worked again to revive her fiancé. It was only a few minutes before they had the bewildered doctor recovering.

"Where—what's coming off here?" the doctor stammered.

"You're on your way to work," Walt explained. "Top of Blackfoot Pass. Want to sit up on the front seat with us and act like a real doctor? Or do we—"

"Never mind," Dr. Kistler cut in. "I'll go on without trouble."

They got going again, Wanda between the two men on the front seat. Neither Walt nor Wanda said much, and Dr. Kistler didn't want to talk at all. They rode like that for two hours, down the steep road cut through fir, spruce and aspens. The mud was bad, even downhill.

Then Wanda was beginning to feel something new inside her. New fear. Not of Walt Arrowhill, though; just fear of herself. She had been changing so fast, in the way she saw things.

Dr. Kistler was doing all he could to be pleasant, under the circumstances. He was trying to take it like a man, now that he had been dragged into this thing. Nevertheless, he resented the way Walt had done it, and he couldn't help showing it.

"It's not that I wouldn't go see these people without pay," he finally said. "I don't want either of you to think that of me."

Walt didn't answer that, and it was not until three in the morning that he had something to say for himself.

"You haven't given me a chance to tell my side of it, Wanda," he said then.

"Then why not now?" She was feeling better toward him.

"I mean, my side of the trouble in Blackfoot Hole. You see, my granddad settled the basin first. For twenty years he had it all too himself and his boys—my dad and uncles. They spread out, homesteaded the best spots on the range, used all the grass.

"Then the little ranchers got to pushing in. Bad ones at first, mostly rustlers and men on the dodge. Then plenty of good ones, too." He paused a moment thoughtfully, before he added, "It seems too bad, but it's in a lot of people to hate men who've got something they want. Both the big and little ranchers in the

basin have fought and killed. Both have been right and both wrong."

"You know, Arrowhill," Dr Kistler said, "I was afraid of some kind of trap when you first came for me. That's mostly why I wouldn't go. Now I see you just a little different. I'm sorry, cowboy."

"Trap?" repeated Walt. "We don't fight that way over in Blackfoot. But there's no more of the old struggle over there. My ranch is down to patented land and range that we've leased, all legal. All free grass is gone—and I'm glad of it."

There came a long pause this time. And Wanda knew that the cowboy behind the wheel was aware of her thought. Then he was bringing it into the open.

"That man I had to kill several weeks back," he said. "That was a fair stand-up fight. He forced it on me, though. I got the best of it only because for years I've realized that second place in a gun-fight is not so good."

"You mean," Wanda exclaimed, "that you've practised with a six-shooter all these years?"

"Yes'm. That was the only way the Arrowhills could stay alive, in past years."

Dr. Kistler slumped back into a grouch. He could be that way, first high, then untalkative, moody.

"So," he said, "you can kill them sometimes, but still you have to drag us out over here to see them when they're sick. It just doesn't add up, Arrowhill."

"Maybe not," Walt half agreed. "But I can't stand to see kids and their mothers sick, in danger of dying, and me not lift a hand to help. We'll be to old Bill Grady's place shortly. Bill and two of his kids are down with fever. . . Hmm —sounds like I'm about to lose my right-rear chain in this rut. . . ."

Big, massive, unshaven, Bill Grady was the leader of the little ranchers. He just couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Walt coming in with a doctor and a nurse.

"Well, I don't savvy it," Bill said, "but we're in desperate need of a doctor. So I can't question this funny business."

Wanda's heart was wrung by the sad plight of these oddly acquired patients. She set to work at once over little Jennie Grady, while the doctor examined the child's father. Walt stayed outside, but close by the door. Wanda knew that he was watching her.

When she went to the door to throw out some water, Walt looked at her in her immaculate white uniform and cap. Those blue eyes of his had a way of making her look up and meet them. This time there was a quick, sudden blaze in them.

"Now there is no *if* to it! he whispered. "I love you, Wanda."

Her face flamed as hot as that of little Jennie on the bed. But she was more angry at herself than at Walt, for letting him start that crazy throbbing inside her. She wanted to put him in his place with some quick retort, but somehow her mind fumbled for words. And she felt Dr. Kistler's eyes on them both. She turned to him.

That look in Ed Kistler's eyes made her start. If a man's eyes had ever flamed with pure hate, they were the doctor's gray eyes now. He turned his head from her, as if to hide what he felt toward Walt.

Wanda saw his hands trembling as he felt awkwardly into his medicine bag. The trembling kept up for minutes, while he measured out powders into even doses and wrapped each dose separately in tiny papers. His voice was tense, husky, as he told Mrs. Grady to give her husband and two sick children each a dose of the powders every two hours. He was terrified now by his own plight.

Bill Grady was looking at the doctor with puzzled expression. Then he looked back at Walt.

"Arrowhill," Grady said, "you make me mighty ashamed, if this fetchin' us a doctor and nurse really comes from your heart."

"You'd do as much for me," Walt said.

Neither of them spoke to each other again. But Wanda felt that the brief conversation was left hanging in the air. Grady was unconvinced, just a little suspicious. Mrs. Grady showed it even more. She kept eying Walt and the doctor. . . .

It was the same at the next ranch and

the next. Suspicion, mistrust; even fear. And Dr. Kistler added to it by his increasing sullenness. He was glum during his examinations. He grew more and more nervous as he gave out medicine. He had seen too much pass between Wanda and Walt.

Once Wanda saw him stop and look at a bottle of powder sharply. Then he thrust the medicine back into its place and his hand shook as he hunted for something else, without seeming to see anything. He jerked his head around, saw her eyes on him. He closed the medicine bag abruptly, and got up.

"Let's go," he said. "I'll write out a prescription they need, and have someone go into town for the medicine."

"I'll send one of my cowboys," Walt said. "You've got two more families to visit, and I'm leaving it up to you and Wanda to finish the job."

"No!" Dr. Kistler said, with sudden panic in his words. "No, you stay with us. They—they might mob me and Wanda."

"What's the matter?" Wanda asked, sensing his fright.

THE doctor's face was as white as any powder he ever gave.

"This thing upset me horribly from the start," he said. "And it didn't help any, seeing you throw me over for him, Wanda." His voice rose to a hysterical shriek. "I was crazy! Yes, crazy, I tell you! That's how it happened!"

"What happened, Ed?" Wanda asked quickly.

"I was so nervous and—and scared that I gave the Grady family the wrong medicine. It might kill Bill Grady and his little girls! But I didn't mean to mix up the medicines. It was a mistake! A mistake, I tell you!"

And the way he cried out the words Wanda knew that it had been a mistake. That was understandable, with such a double strain upon the doctor.

Nevertheless, the nurse's face was draining white. The ranchers might think that Walt Arrowhill had planned to poison them through this fetching in of a doctor and nurse. They would be sure to lynch Walt also! "Can't you save the Gradys?" she cried. "Let's go. Have you a stomach pump with you?"

"Yes, but—it may be too late!"

"Just the same," Walt snapped, "we're going to try to get you back there in time. Jump into the station wagon, both of you!"

Walt helped Wanda into the station wagon first. Just as Dr. Kistler was getting in, he saw Walt off guard for a second.

Like a big grizzly turning on his keeper, Kistler lunged at Walt. He closed arms about the young rancher and carried him to the ground with all the force of his huge body. Walt was underneath as they hit. His head slapped hard against a stone. Kistler smacked fists into the cowboy's jaw—terrific wallops. Walt went out cold.

Kistler grabbed Walt's six-shooter and leaped up to the driver's seat. Wanda tried to spring from the station wagon but Kistler caught her and tugged her back with one powerful arm. Managing to hold her, he got the station wagon on the move. He kept feeding the gas.

Soon he turned Wanda loose and gave all his attention to holding the station wagon in the muddy, gutted road. Wanda knew that jumping out now meant mangling her body, and might mean death. But she had to do it! They were leaving Walt back there unconscious, to be lynched!

She tried to snap off the ignition. When Kistler knocked her hands away she clawed at his face.

"Stop it, you little fool!" he cried. "We're riding for our lives! We've got to get clean out of the country, and by some back door—the wilder the better!"

"But I'm not going without getting Walt out too!" she vowed. "They'll lynch him, dead sure, the same hour one of the Gradys dies."

"I can't help that, even if I'm sorry," snapped Kistler. "He's the cause of it all anyway. Doctors give the wrong medicine sometimes even under the best of circumstances. I can't help it if I made a mistake! And I'm keeping you—as a hostage, if it comes to that."

"I know it was a mistake Ed," she said pleadingly. "But let's don't leave Walt to pay for it like this!"

"He'd leave me," Kistler retorted.

"And I'm afraid of him! He terrifies me."

Wanda snatched at the ignition keys. The station wagon swerved, rammed into the bank, stopped. Kistler seized her wrist, but she tore loose and leaped from the seat. He caught her before she took the third running stride.

Then with almost brute fury, he held her and tied her hands together. With his belt he bound her feet. Then he put her on the floor in the station wagon, behind the front seat. He backed away from the bank, stepped on the gas. . . .

Walt Arrowhill didn't recover consciousness until the station wagon was out of sight. When he did sit up, the ranch family peered out a window, as if he were a wild beast they feared.

Walt got up and walked toward the house, regardless of their fear of him. As he neared the open door the rancher, Henry King, stepped out with a Winchester in his hands.

"I don't savvy all this stuff, Arrowhill," King growled. "You better head the other way."

"Lend me a horse, Henry," Walt begged. "Dr. Kistler gave Bill Grady and his family the wrong medicine—by mistake. I've got to catch Kistler and take him back to try and save the Gradys."

"A few horses in the corral," King said grudgingly, still afraid. "It'll go mighty hard with you if Kistler poisoned somebody."

Walt raced to the corral, grabbed a rope and dropped a loop over the head of a medium-coupled bay with deep chest and good legs—a stayer, if he knew horses.

It wasn't long until the fresh tracks showed him that Kistler had turned out of the main road with the station wagon, and fought it up a side road toward the mountain. Still with Wanda along, too.

About a mile up the side road Dr. Kistler had bogged the station wagon down entirely. Tracks led from it toward a small ranch over a ridge. Wanda's footprints beside Dr. Kistler's. Anyway, he hadn't killed her by turning the station wagon over on her. But Kistler was a crazy man now, and there was no telling what a crazy man might do. That inward urgency kept Walt pushing his horse for all it was worth.

At the little ranch only two small children were home. Yes, a man and a woman had come and got horses. The pretty girl had been crying. The man was mean to her. He had tied her onto her horse, looked like.

"Taking her along," Walt thought, "as a pawn to save his own hide, if worst came to worst. At least I hope that's it."

Walt sized up the lay of the country. The horse tracks led up the back of a ridge that curved crescent-shaped. He cut across the crescent, then dropped off and led his puffing horse hard up the mountainside.

Just as he was topping out, he looked back and saw Kistler coming. Kistler had Wanda tied on her horse now, and was whipping it along. Walt eased his own mount back, bushed it in some oaks. Then he crept downward, trying to get where he could leap out and grab Kistler's horse as he passed.

But Wanda's horse spotted Walt in the manzanita brush. It stopped, blowing through its nostrils. Kistler pulled up, peered Walt's way. He grabbed out Walt's Colt as Walt stepped out into the open.

"Walt, haven't you got a gun?" Wanda cried.

"No," Walt answered, "but I'm taking my Colt from Kistler."

"Arrowhill," Kistler said measuredly, "three steps more and I'll kill you."

"You haven't got the nerve to shoot," Walt taunted. "That horse'd pitch you off into those rocks and break your neck. I'm taking you back to save the people you poisoned, Kistler."

"To be lynched, you mean!" Kistler cried. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

Kistler cocked the six-shooter. He was a cornered coward, and Walt knew that kind would kill.

"You might hit me one shot, Kistler," Walt said, "but I'll carry your lead long enough to get to you—after that horse pitches you off."

"No, Walt, no!" Wanda cried.

But Walt took a slow, deliberate step. Then another and another. He saw the wild panic in Kistler's eyes, knew the man wanted to murder him. But a coward shrinks from being torn and bruised

in such cruel rocks.

Walt took the fourth step.

"Oh, Walt, dear," he heard Wanda saying, "Don't make him kill you! I love you!"

But Walt didn't stop. He was within five steps of Kistler. He saw in Kistler's eyes that the man was going to shoot. Walt made a swift dive for him. In the same instant he yelled wildly at Kistler's horse.

The horse tried to swing around. Kistler fired. The bullet tore into Walt's left side, plowing a furrow off a rib. The next instant Walt's hands closed about Kistler's leg. The horse was pitching.

Walt dragged Kistler from the saddle. Kistler fired a second time, and missed, then Walt was into him on the ground, fighting tigerishly to keep that gun from his body. All the while he could hear Wanda's anguished calls. She had to sit her horse helplessly and watch the fearful battle.

THE two men rolled down among the rocks. Walt had the bad luck to land underneath again, jammed in tight between two jagged rocks. Kistler crashed the six-shooter into the side of Walt's head and everything went black before Walt's eyes.

But he did manage to get both hands onto Kistler's big bony wrist. He had enough strength left to hang on and turn the gun aside.

That was the way they were when Wanda saw her chance. She had the use of her hands for guiding her horse. She whirled the animal, yelled at it, and sent it charging down upon Kistler. He saw her intent and threw up a hand as if in a vain hope to ward off the charge of the horse.

The horse swerved, refusing to run over the two writhing men. But Kistler's momentary diversion gave Walt his chance. The blackness was fading. He could see the blur of the man above him. He flung up both legs from behind, caught one around Kistler's neck and heaved.

That bent Kistler backward, and Walt whirled out of his tight spot. Then he was tearing the gun from Kistler's hand. As Kistler lost the Colt, he also lost his last vestige of fight.

"Don't shoot me!" he cried. "I'll give up!"

Walt pulled back from him, panting, bloody.

"You're going back, Doctor," he ordered. "To try to save Grady and his family, yes, but to tell them just how it all happened, too."

Walt untied Wanda's feet, then ordered Kistler to get back onto his horse.

"Walt," Wanda pleaded, "don't go back! Kistler isn't saying a word, see. I mean, not fighting this return. He's told me that he'll be satisfied to die if they lynch you with him."

"I'm not built to run off from a thing like this," Walt said. "It's got to be settled down there today, mob or no mob. . . ."

The nearer they came to the Grady ranch, the more tense all three grew. Wanda wanted to scream out to Walt to turn around and ride for it while there still was time. But she knew he was right. He just wasn't built that way.

They came in sight of Grady's big log house. There was no mob. Not a living being was around. They rode up to the door. Walt got off and knocked.

Mrs. Grady came to the door. Walt beban to explain why they had come back. He nodded to the disheveled doctor and glanced down at his own bloody self.

"Come in, Walt!" he heard Grady call.

Walt forced Kistler to lead the way inside. There lay Grady in bed, no worse than when the doctor had left him.

"I didn't take your cussed medicine, Doctor," Grady said. "Wouldn't let my kids take it. This thing looked too suspicious to me. But now"—his eyes ran over the two men—"I can't help believin' what I see. Walt, you're not half-bad. But I'm still mighty glad I was suspicious. Kistler, you better start ridin' and stay long gone, hombre. . . Walt, could you go after some other sawbones for all of us?"

Walt heard a little sob. There was Wanda, crying right out loud, and not one bit ashamed of it. Walt stepped over to her.

"Wanda," he whispered, "I'm going to kiss you right here in front of everybody."

"If you don't," she said, so all could hear, "I'll have to start it first!"

(Continued from page 7)

Fragments of diaries and mission records piece out the little that is known about that California pasear. Heaps of important episodes were left out. The main chronicles concerned battles with thieving, marauding Indians. Once a band of redskins attacked the 18 trappers and fled to the mountains with their horses.

Surprise Attack

Kit, then hardly 20, got 11 of his comrades together and pursued. Tracking the raiders about 100 miles, they came on the Indians' camp. There were fully 100 Indians. The 12 bold trappers made a surprise midnight attack, under Kit's leadership, shot up the camp, routed the thieves, and came back with thirty head of horses—more than they had lost.

Soon after ths event, the trappers journeyed back to Santa Fe with an immense quantity of beaver furs. Kit's share of the profits was $500, a fortune in those days. He proceeded to whoop it up, killed a man in a street brawl, and to escape vengeance he hit the trail for Utah with another band of trappers led by one James Fitzpatrick.

In the spring of 1830, Kit and three others left the Fitzpatrick party to trap the Arkansas headwaters in company with Captain James Yount, and about 20 others. They were repeatedly attacked by Crow Indians, once fleeing for 50 miles in a chase that cost the lives of several trappers. Kit was slightly wounded.

The custom, then, was for trappers to form in large parties, to resist attack. But Kit got the idea that the safest procedure that a party of two or three would succeed better by escaping notice of the Indians. In this way he trapped the streams of Colorado and Utah, bringing beaver, mink and otter furs to Taos, and making fair profit.

Badly Wounded

He fared as far north as present-day Wyoming, and on the Laramie one day was treed by a huge grizzly, fighting it off with a club as it tried to gnaw down the tree. That was his skeeriest adventure, Kit claimed afterwards, worse than any Indian fight, because he was up that little old tree nearly all day and half the night, with plenty of time to worry.

Along about 1835, Kit was badly wounded in rescuing a comrade in a Blackfoot skirmish, receiving a bullet in the left shoulder that laid him out for many weeks.

That happened up on the Snake, in what later became Idaho, and one of his companions was Captain Jim Bridger. When Kit was still crippled with that shattered shoulder, he fought a gun duel with a Hudson's Bay Company trapper, a big bully known as Shuman. They rode at each other, Shuman with a rifle, Kit with only a pistol. A rifle bullet clipped off a lock of Kit's hair. The French trapper was stopped with a pistol ball that entered his hand and lodged near the elbow.

Kit trapped as far as the Yellowstone and beyond, north and west, and came to know the country like a book. During this period he engaged in another duel, a bloody one that almost cost him his life. With only a large knife, he fought a mountain lion that he had shot, wounded and enraged. He bore the scars of that encounter to his grave.

At Taos, Kit married twice. His first wife, a Comanche girl, soon died, after bearing one child, a girl. His second, a Mexican, had two children, including Kit Junior.

Served Under Fremont

It was when Kit took his first child to St. Louis for upbringing and schooling that he met General (then Lieutenant) John C. Fremont and was employed as chief guide to explore routes from Missouri to California. He served under Fremont in two expeditions, the second one taking him as far as Columbia River, at The Dalles. From this second exploration, a return to Bent's Fort, on the Arkansas in southern Kansas, was undertaken. It was an audacious undertaking, being midwinter, and across unknown country in what is now Nevada. There were 25 persons in the party and they nearly perished from hunger and cold, and were beset by Indians as well.

Came the year 1845. Kit was 36—time to settle down, he thought—so he threw in with a man named Owen, sheep-ranching near Taos. Settle down? Kit Carson never did. News of his many exploits had spread. Eastern papers had told and retold them. Kit Carson had become a legend.

There was war in California in 1847—the

Mexican War. Carson joined Fremont on a third expedition, no exploration this time, but a campaign to make California U.S. territory.

They fought from Sonoma to San Diego, often against cruel Apaches, which the Mexicans had hired and bribed in a good deal the same fashion of the French & Indian War of our early colonial history. But California was brought under American rule and Fremont was appointed Governor. Once during this time, Carson bore military despatches east, looked eagerly to a brief reunion with his family, but when within a few miles of Taos met a westbound courier, who took Carson's messages on to Washington. So Carson had to turn back to California.

Kit was a Lieutenant-Colonel now, and was present at the final capitulation of the Mexican forces near San Fernando, and when hostilities ended and the new government established, he did succeed in returning to Taos, though after harrowing ordeals on the desert in fights with Pau-Eutaw (Piute) Indians.

Destiny Steps In

Again he "settled down." But destiny again stepped in. He was called to Washington by President Polk, was welcomed with great pomp and honor, and presented to both branches of The Congress.

He fled from the national capital after a week of it, back to Taos and sheep-ranching, with a little trapping on the side, and more Indian fighting. Only to be appointed, in 1854, as Indian Agent for New Mexico Territory, which then included Arizona.

Kit Carson's career, from 1862 to '66, was crowded with important duties. With federal troops withdrawn from western posts to engage in the War Between the States, there were serious uprisings among the Comanches, Kiowas, Cheyennes, Apaches and the Navajos.

A Believer in Justice

As full Colonel now, Kit led troops to victory against the Apaches, and subdued the wily Navajos in their ancient stronghold, Canyon de Chelly. One hundred loyal Utes served under him. But no veteran rights or pensions ever were awarded them for relieving hard-pressed Union troops.

[*Turn page*]

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Yet Kit Carson himself, for all his lifetime of Indian fighting, urged justice for the redman. He had great knowledge of Indians. He opposed the harsh policy of extermination, and when appointed Special Indian Commissioner in 1865, he fathered the Reservation Plan. Adoption of this humane policy was climaxed when he re-visited Washington in 1868 with a deputation of tribesmen. This was a triumphal tour for Carson. He was greeted en route with waving flags and cheering crowds.

That was the last journey of the West's most famous guide and trailblazer. He died in May of that year, aged 59. How? This fearless man, whose life had been a constant series of hairbreadth escapes, and who had mocked danger since he was 15, was stricken suddenly by a burst blood vessel as he mounted a horse, dying with one foot in a stirrup.

But perhaps that was a nobler end than that of Daniel Boone, who fell to the Grim Reaper in his 80's—as a result of over-eating baked sweet potatoes!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

THE HISTORY of the magnificent state of Texas is as much interwoven with its rivers as with it's vast expanse of prairie and desert. From the famed Rio Grande on the south to the Red River at the Oklahoma boundary, history has been made and written. The Nueces, Trinity, Brazos, Sabine, Colorado and others running into tidewater have been the background of many colorous tales of outlaws and rustlers. The Pecos River in west Texas has contributed its share to the lore of the state—with Judge Roy Bean and his "law west of the Pecos" probably the best known of all the stories.

But the Mist River was something that concerned one man primarily—and that man was the famous Texas Ranger, Jim Hatfield. The next issue of TEXAS RANGERS brings you readers another bang-up, fast-moving novel of Jim Hatfield's doings. GUNS OF MIST RIVER by Jackson Cole gives Hatfield a case where most of the action takes place along this mysterious stream. Cattle disappear, men are hanged, rancher pitted against rancher—all this against the background of the Mist River.

Let's dip into a few pages of GUNS OF MIST RIVER and see through the eyes of Jim Hatfield what he'll be up against in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS:

When Jim Hatfield first saw the herd, it was but a tawny dust cloud rising slowly against the distant skyline. A cloud that rolled steadily westward, its golden mist swirling upward to dissipate in the blue of the Texas sky.

From where Hatfield sat his great golden horse, a long slope tumbled steeply downward to the level rangeland beyond. Still farther beyond was Mist River, winding and shining in the sun, cleaving the green and amethyst prairie that dimmed eastward into the distances.

To the south of the ridge crest, Mist River abandoned its low though steep banks and dived into the dark mouth of a towering-walled canyon. The rimrock of the canyon was a torn and jagged saw-edge of black stone mottled with white and banded with scarlet and russet and yellow. The hills whose frowning battlements the canyons pierced looked like great irregular blocks of granite that had been hurled helter-skelter by Titans at play.

Hatfield eyed the approaching herd, still invisible under the dust cloud, with the disapproval of an experienced cattleman.

"No sense in shoving cows along like that, especially in warm weather," he told Goldy, the horse.

Shortly, Hatfield could see a number of horsemen shoving the herd along. All were behind the moving cows.

"Nobody at point or wing," he mused. "Everybody riding drag. Well, reckon there isn't much chance for them to turn, with the trail running straight across the range, so nobody's needed along the sides of the bunch. And that's always the system when a jigger is in a hurry. But I still can't figure why he's got such a hustle on. That is, unless—"

He left the sentence unfinished, but his eyes narrowed slightly with the thought. Instinctively, his slender, bronzed hands dropped to the butts of the heavy black guns that sagged from the double cartridge belts encircling his lean waist. He loosened the long Colts in their carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters. After all, a hustling herd might be shoved along by somebody under whose name their brand was *not* registered!

Thoughtfully, he eyed the approaching cows. They were less than a mile from the river bank now, and coming along at a great rate.

"For the love of Pete!" Hatfield ejaculated a little later.

At undiminished speed, the herd thundered to the river's brink. Behind the lumbering cows

[*Turn page*]

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the horsemen waved slickers and hats, slapping the frantic beefs across their rumps. Hatfield could almost hear the shouts and whoops. He saw the riders fan out to one side, race along the herd, veering it from the trail and to the left. Then they fell back and charged in a strung-out line at the rear.

The cows reached the edge of the perpendicular bank, bawling and bleating. Over the lip went the leaders, shoved ahead by the charging mass behind. The water foamed up in a silvery spray as the heavy bodies crashed its surface. In scant minutes the stream was dotted with brown heads and heaving backs. Then the current caught the swimming animals and swept them downstream. One after another, they vanished from sight into the dark mouth of the canyon. . . .

When the last cow was in the stream, the horsemen swerved their mounts and diagonaled south by east across the prairie. They did not backtrack by way of the trail.

And with good reason. Sitting his horse on the ridge crest, too far away to hope to take part, even had he desired, in the hectic activity, Hatfield saw the next act of the peculiar drama.

A second dust cloud had for some time been rising in the east. Now Hatfield saw a string of bouncing dots swerve from the trail and stream southward, apparently bent on intercepting the speeding horsemen who had shoved the herd into the river. At a long slant the two bodies of riders drew together, toward the apex of a triangle that would be the curve of the rangeland around the jagged eastern approaches of the hills that flanked the canyon.

Tense with interest, Hatfield watched the race. He saw white puffs mushroom from the ranks of the men to the north. A little later, answering puffs stained the air to the south.

"Range too great for anything like accurate shooting, though," Hatfield muttered, bending forward in the saddle, his muscles rigid with excitement.

The men to the south reached the curve of the hill slopes first, veered around it and disappeared from view. The pursuers still shooting, skalleyhooted after them, in turn to vanish from sight.

Hatfield relaxed. He shook his black head. The thing was beyond words! It just naturally didn't make sense!

"What in the blazes is the meaning of all this?" he demanded at length. "Why should some jiggers shove a big bunch of cows into the river to drown in that canyon? I've a notion the cows belonged to the second bunch that came along gunning for the first ones. They 'peared plenty riled, all right. Wonder if they caught up with the hellions? Don't think so, though. The fellers in front had a good head start when they swerved around the hills. Reckon they'll get in the clear as soon as it is dark, and that isn't far off. What is going on in this section, anyhow? Well, I've a notion it will stand a mite of looking into!"

Well, folks, there's the situation. And when Jim Hatfield starts looking into it, things happen with a vengeance as strong as the state of Texas is wide! Look forward to

GUNS OF MIST RIVER in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS, in which Jim Hatfield clears the mist from the series of strange events that occur with surprising suddenness!

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OUR MAIL BAG

HERE we are again, asking for more letters from you readers. We sure do like to receive them and read your opinion of TEXAS RANGERS and the stories and articles we publish. We thank those who have already written to us, and the following quotes are from a few of the letters received:

I love to read TEXAS RANGERS. Just want to say any of the books about Jim Hatfield, the Texas Ranger, are O.K. I also hope he will marry the girl Anita Robertson. I would like to know

[*Turn page*]

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Jim had the love of a lovely girl like Anita. I have been reading books since I was eleven years old. Am sixty-three, so I ought to know a good book by now and think TEXAS RANGERS is tops!—*Mrs. J. S. Day, High Point, North Carolina.*

TEXAS RANGERS makes me think of my Dad. My Dad was a Texas Ranger for many years. He used to take me on his knee when I was a small girl and tell me about the times he traveled all over the West looking for outlaws. He was a little man, with real black hair and eyes like new pieces of steel. His name was James Sibirn Clark. There are still lots of people that would remember him. So you see why I like to read about the Texas Rangers?—*Mrs. Jennie V. Ward, Kirbyville, Texas.*

For the past six years I have been a regular reader of your TEXAS RANGERS magazine, and so far I haven't read a story in it that didn't have the tang of the old West. Jackson Cole is my favorite author . . . Being in the British navy, I find plenty of time for reading and writing. My main interests are in Western subjects of any kind. Keep up the good work and please ask Jackson Cole to leave Jim Hatfield single.—*George Haxell, Grays, Essex, England.*

I want to tell you that Jim Hatfield, in my opinion, is the fastest hombre that ever strapped on two hoglegs, and also with his fists. Let him use his fists a little more often. Why don't you let Anita and Jim go to a barn dance together and put a little romance in the story?—*James W. Dunn, Flint, Michigan.*

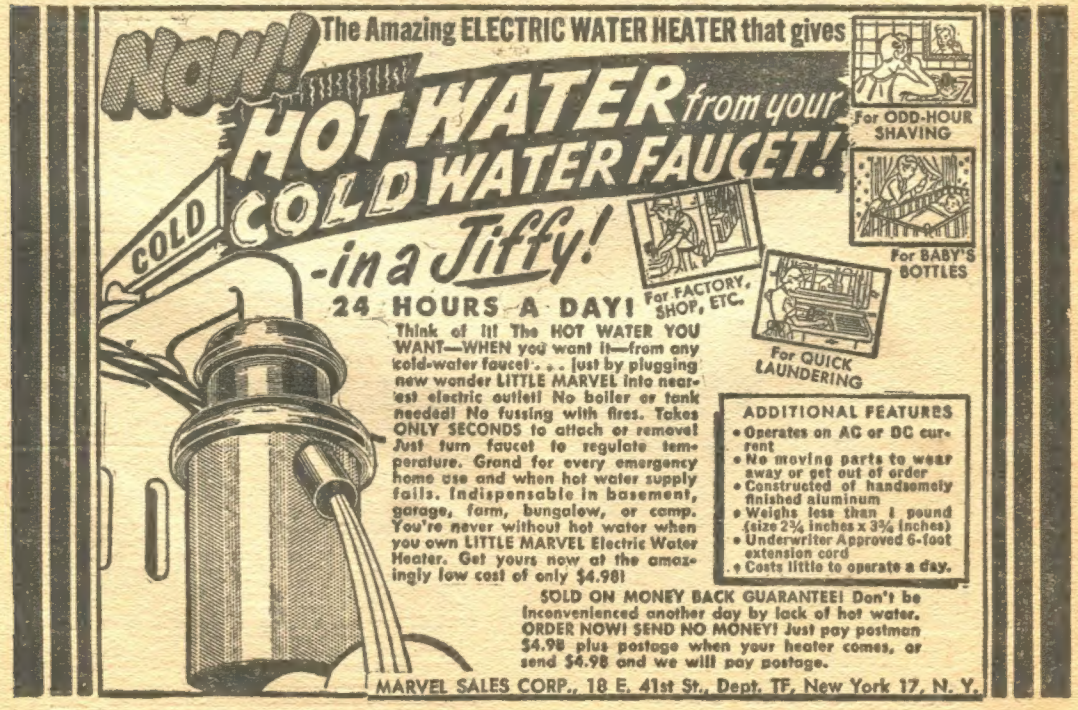
This is the first time I have written to you about your magazine TEXAS RANGERS. I have been reading it for a couple of years and think it tops. I have just finished reading "The Ghost In Golden Armor." It struck me as an excellent story. The best part was Hatfield in a cave with a bear. Some of his tight spots don't appeal to me. It was a good thing there was a smart girl in the story to help rescue him. Girls or no girls, just keep those swell stories coming.—*Lorraine Appl, Leoti, Kansas.*

While passing a book seller on the streets today, I saw he had a couple of magazines. On closer examination, I saw one of them titled TEXAS RANGERS. I picked it up and glanced through the pages, and knew from the start it was a swell magazine. I bought it on the spot. I think the magazine ought to be left as it is, and not changed. After all, you can't please everybody.—*Jack Ferrais, Shanghai, China.*

Well, that's about all for this time, folks. Again we'd like to say that we always enjoy hearing from the readers of TEXAS RANGERS, so why not drop us a line giving us your opinion of this magazine? Kindly address your letter or postcard to The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y.

So long for this issue, and thanks again, everybody.

THE EDITOR.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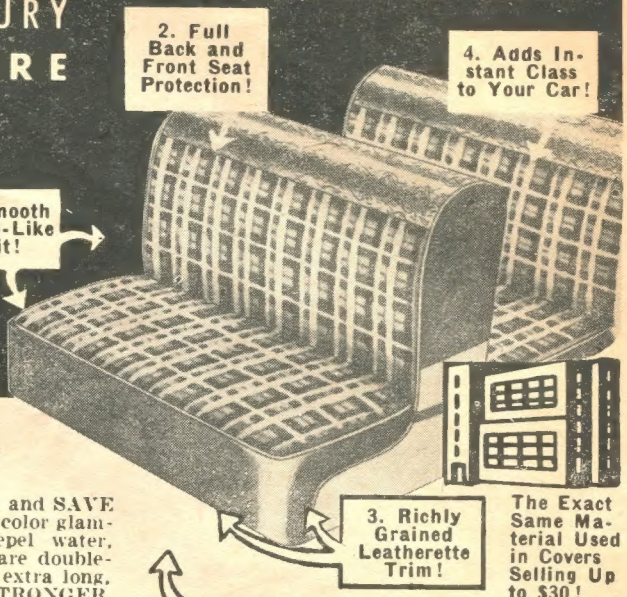
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